

Walnut orchards part of Solano since 1930s

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One of my fond memories of growing up in Germany includes spending dark winter nights with my family, reading to each other while sharing a special treat - a bowl of California walnuts. My brother and I would try to shell the nuts so that the two halves of the shells remained undamaged. These half shells eventually would be used to fashion little boats, baskets, figurines and other crafts.

Now that I live in Solano County, I enjoy seeing the beauty of the walnut orchards throughout the area.

Over the last decades, walnuts have become one of the major agricultural crops in Solano County.

Last year, orchards produced more than \$18 million worth of walnuts on more than 8,000 acres.

The first commercial orchard in California to grow English walnuts was established in 1867 by horticulturist Joseph Sexton in Goleta, Santa Barbara County. The deep soils and coastal climate proved ideal for their cultivation, and within a short time, walnut orchards covered much of the area.

At that time, Solano farmers specialized in stone fruit orchards.

They may have had a few walnut trees for home consumption planted around the perimeter of an orchard.

With the development of new, heat-tolerant varieties, commercial walnut production moved into the Central Valley, including Solano County, in the early 1930s. Walnuts need deep, well-drained loamy soil, as their roots can reach down 10 feet or more.

Orchards typically consist of several varieties. After planting, trees take about 5 years to bearing age and can produce up to a century.

Mary Eldredge's grandfather planted a small orchard around 1930. She recalled in an oral interview for "Solano's Gold The People and Their Orchards":

"The trees were planted alternating between Eureka and Waterloo. Then every third

row would be a Franquette.

The plan to planting walnuts is based on when they bloom and how they'll be pollinated. Walnuts have to be cross-pollinated. They bloom and the wind blows the pollen over from one tree to another."

Today, more than 30 varieties of walnuts are cultivated in California. The five most commonly grown are the Chandler, Hartley, Serr, Vina and Tulare.

They are especially suited to the hot climate in our area and in the Central Valley.

Harvesting methods changed drastically during the 1950s.

Prior to that, walnuts had to be handpicked.

Harvesting started in mid- to late September, when the green hulls surrounding the walnuts split to release the nut within.

One man would walk along the trees, carrying a long wooden pole with a hook.

His task was to shake the walnuts out of the hull to the ground.

Pickers followed, with a sack tied around their waist. They would stoop to pick up the walnuts off the ground, dragging the increasingly heavy sack. Eventually, they emptied the sack into a lager bin.

Pickers were paid by the sack. It was back-breaking stoop labor.

By the late 1940s, the first mechanized picking machines arrived. Frank Buss recalled: "You do walnuts the way you do prunes, which is to knock them down. As I got older, climbing up a ladder with a pole and knocking them, I came to the conclusion that I might fall off the damned ladder, so I bought a machine to knock them out of the trees. It reaches up into the tree 25 feet. You hit up against the limbs. Some rigs clamp onto the limbs and they do a better job."

Once on the ground, the walnuts were swept into a row and gathered into sacks. The nuts then need to be hulled and dried.

Early on, walnuts were laid out on trays to be dried for a couple of days in the sun. Workers raked the nuts periodically, which created a distinctive sound.

The dried nuts were then bagged and the bags sown up with twine.

Today, walnuts are dried in dehydrators, often directly on the grower's ranch.

Walnuts are no longer a special treat, but have become a staple of our daily diets.

California now produces nearly all of the commercial United States walnut supplies. On the global market, California produces two-thirds of the world's supply of walnuts.

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