

Anyone Growing Avocados?

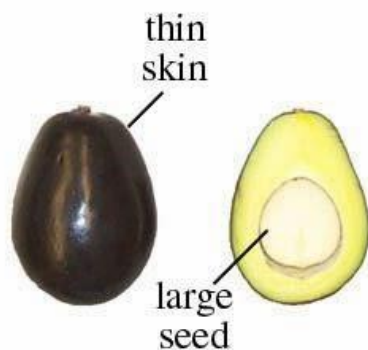
by Al Chomica

A lot of gardeners have been successfully growing citrus plants on Vancouver Island over the last few years. Many of these citrus are not extremely hardy, yet they seem to survive our Zone 8 growing climate. We have been growing two lemon trees under the eaves of our house and one has been in the ground for 11 years so they can survive and fruit here. A couple of years back I heard of a variety of avocados that also grows in a Zone 8 climate and sourced a supplier on the mainland.

I might be going out on a limb here, but I believe there are only three places that have them growing in Canada and one of them is now here in Nanoose Bay. Apparently, they are also grown and harvested on Salt Spring Island, and Bob Duncan from Fruit Trees and More in Saanich has some growing and even sells them. Like citrus, they do better if protected from our cold winter rains.

This variety is called a Mexicola Avocado that grows well in northern California and ours survived last winter in our food forest without any real protection. Well, it barely survived. I should have insulated it to keep those tender leaves and the tender green bark from the -6°C temperatures we got last December. Apparently, avocados will die back at -8°C in their younger years so the goal will be to nurse this baby along for a couple of years until the plant develops a protective bark. The Mexicola is unique among avocados in that the skin turns dark when ripe and is edible.

Mexicola
"A" flower type
Black when ripe
Smooth skin



When my Mexicola Avocado arrived along with an edible Ostrich Fern it was a beautiful young tree as in the image above. It was four feet tall with long, shiny, tropical-looking leaves and it was planted in a south east 'sweet' spot against the wood shed and under an overhang.

The avocado probably originated in southern Mexico but was cultivated from the Rio Grande to central Peru before the arrival of Europeans. There are three types of avocados, the Guatemalan, Mexican and West Indian. Hybrid forms exist between all three types. The ones we buy in a store are Guatemalan avocados.

Avocados do well in the mild-winter areas of California, Florida and Hawaii. Some hardier varieties like the Mexicola can be grown in the cooler parts of northern and inland California and along the Gulf Coast. West Indian varieties thrive in humid, tropical climates and freeze at or near 0° C. Guatemalan types are native to cool, high-altitude tropics and are hardy to -3° C. Mexican types are native to dry subtropical plateaus and thrive in a Mediterranean climate like we have in Nanoose. They are hardy to -8° C. Avocados need some protection from high winds which may break the branches. There are also some dwarf forms of avocados suitable for growing in containers.

High in monosaturates, the oil content of avocados is second only to olives among fruits, and sometimes greater. Many years ago, I lived in a tropical country and showed some people how to sprout avocados using toothpicks and a glass of water like we did in grade school. The avocado grew and was planted in the ground with an elaborate irrigation scheme that used a discharge of high-phosphate detergent from a washing machine. During its third year it had almost 50 avocados formed - but then I moved back to Canada.

During a trip to northern Australia one year I camped near a grove of massive avocado trees and slept through a wicked wind storm that knocked down more than a dozen avocados that were as huge as a football. It took almost a week for two people to eat one of those tasty behemoths. My Mexicola avocados will be as small as an apple but just as tasty if I can get the plant to survive.



In attempts to get the plant established early it was given a prime location and the soil was turned into a wonderful growing medium by the addition of Bio Char and compost. However, when the plant was taken out of the pot all the soil fell away, revealing that it had almost no roots attached to the stem. It appeared to me that the pot may have been dropped onto a hard surface, severing the delicate roots from the plant. After a week the leaves started to get brown spots and dropped off the plant, one by one, over the next two months.

I was concerned it wasn't going to make it but then when there was only one leaf left, a new shoot revealed itself as in the picture on the right. The plant had caught and was growing new leaves at last.



Those shoots grew well all summer and the resulting evergreen leaves were eventually tucked away under a floating row cover to survive the winter. When we went into an extended deep freeze in December all the leaves dropped off again and that nice green bark turned black after it froze solid. My prized avocado was dead along with a banana passionfruit that was also out of its growing zone.

Sometime in mid-August, I was preparing to plant a Golden Kiwi in the sweet spot where the avocado had been planted last year. Much to my surprise the avocado had survived and had grown a foot tall, unnoticed. Well, the black vine weevils noticed it and had chewed a lot of the tender leaves as in the first picture. So, I completely covered the plant with a mesh screen to keep them off. The second picture shows the new growth a month later after protection from the weevils. Those leaves are evergreen and tender and it was at this stage the plant was tucked in for winter.



First, I made a mesh barrier around the plant, supported by sticks, to keep bugs out and to allow air circulation.



Then the whole area was filled with dry leaves that were covered loosely by a sheet of floating row cover. That was then sheltered by a large piece of overhead glass to create a bit of a micro climate. It will get no heat other than from the sun, the idea here being to never enter winter with wet soil.

Since this avocado survived one of the coldest winters on record and made a comeback, I feel confident that this little plant will be contributing to our culinary enjoyment of guacamole within a few more years. If it does, I will make some to share at a garden club meeting.