

Jack Swords Interview, Local Chapter History

By Tom Sheldon

On June 28th, 2022, Jack Swords gave me and my wife Jenny Weaver a tour of his fantastic property and sat down with us to talk about the history of the local CRFG chapter. In Part 1 of this article, I described the tour. It appeared in the August 2022 CRFG-CC Leaflet newsletter available here (see 2022/Aug):

<https://www.crfg-central.org/newsletters>

Watch the video tour of Jack's Jungle: <https://youtu.be/kD6eTycJPZc>

Jack Swords is no stranger to long-time members of the local CRFG. He literally started the group back in the 1970s. At that time, Jack was collecting rare fruits on a property in Orcutt, but when it turned into a passion, he moved to a larger property in Nipomo where he eventually planted an entire jungle. I'm guessing his interest may have started in the 7th grade when he took up beekeeping. An article in the July 1986 Santa Maria Times quoted Jack saying, "The main reason I became interested in rare fruits is because someone said they couldn't be raised here." Jack has proved over and over that they will grow and flourish here-- except for those dang mangos.



Jack Swords

One reason for visiting Jack was to hear about the history of the early CRFG. We also toured his property and spent quite a bit of time wandering the many paths before we finally managed to sit down and talk. Jack led us to a table and chairs under a large cherimoya tree. He was prepared for us with a selection of fruit on the table to taste, including Surinam cherries (Westree 369, a variety developed by Nelson Westree) and jaboticaba, a fruit that grows right on the bark of its tree trunk. We also got some allspice leaves to smell and chew, and Jenny got an allspice plant to take home.

Jack showed us three different newspaper clippings from the 1980s that highlighted the progress of his work and his adventures at gathering seeds in places like Mexico, Costa Rica, Hawaii, and Belize. He mentions that they have been on the current property since 1975. He was teaching 6th grade at the time



*Jack Swords in 1987 from
Telegram/Tribune article.
Photo by Mark Buchman*

when he met John Moore, who had an acre in Orcutt where he was planting fruit trees. Jack says he would go out there and browse his property and think "I want to grow some of this."

John Moore was the one who got Jack involved with the California Rare Fruit Growers. He says "We would take trips down to San Diego because that was the only place in California where some of these rare fruits were growing. We would drive down and camp or stay in a hotel and then visit all these people involved with rare fruits."

The California Group

Two of the people who started the main California Rare Fruit Growers' group were John Riley up in Santa Clara and Paul Thomson down in Bonsall CA. Jack says "I never met John Riley, but I met Paul Thompson many many times. I got advice and plants from Paul. Interesting person. Ex-marine. At that time, Paul would prepare a newsletter using a mimeograph! He sent that newsletter out to all the California members, which was probably only 20 to 30 people. And so, I would get this newsletter and once a year we would get a year-book chock full of information."

Riley and Thompson first started talking about forming a group way back in 1966, and by 1968 they had formed an official group. By 1971, membership had grown to 379 members and by 1975 to 595 members. Today, there are over 3000 registered members in California and beyond, as well as many other unofficial members.

More information about the state group can be found at <https://crrfg.org/home/history/>

The Local Group

Jack began to get involved with more people on the Central Coast who were involved in growing fruit. One character was Art Henzgen. Jack says "Art would sell a variety of plants such as coffee in a paper cup full of soil at the Farmers' Market. Each cup had a stick to identify the plant." Art would eventually become the co-organizer and co-chair of the newly formed Central Coast chapter of the CRFG.

Jack says about that time the local Five Cities newspaper would call him every day to get the weather in Nipomo since Jack had an extensive set of temperature gauges on his property. "I would give them the minimum and maximum temperatures at around 5 or 6 AM. Jerry Bunin was my contact at the newspaper, and he wrote an article about my work that appeared in the paper. There was little knowledge of our group until these articles (Bunin's article and two others) were written in the local newspapers. They helped get the word out about our group. People who were interested in rare fruits connected with each other because of these articles.

According to Jack, about 10 people decided to organize a local chapter of the CRFG. He estimates this was in the mid-1980s. They started meeting in the community room at the Mid-State Bank in Nipomo (now the Mechanics Bank). It was a small group, but it was made up a people dedicated to raising rare plants. The organizing members were Jack and his wife Mary Kay, along with Art Henzgen and his wife Doris. Jack and Art were co-chairs, Mary Kay was treasurer, and Doris was secretary. Jack said that Gabrielle Robbins was a part of it. He said, "She's been around since the very beginning, and she is raising a lot of different stuff considering that she is in a much colder climate."

Editor's Note: You can find the memorial page for Art Henzgen on the CRFG Central Coast Web site here: <https://www.crfg-central.org/in-memoram>



Art and Doris Henzgen



Doris and Art at a CRFG meeting



Joe Sabol (former chair) and Dick Pottratz (current treasurer)

One person made a connection with Cal Poly. Jack thinks it was Les Ferreira. There were a few meetings at Cal Poly and the word started getting around among like-minded people. Membership increased considerably due to the Cal Poly meetings. But the real magic for the group was Joe Sabol, a Cal Poly ag professor. Once Joe got involved, membership really exploded.

Jack said that "Joe added a lot more activities. Like the Festival of Fruit and the scion exchange and the apple grafting. There are now hundreds of members. But Joe is quite a spokesman for the group and heck of a good guy. In a nutshell, that is how it developed. We didn't have a newsletter. We pretty much wrote with quill pens."

Side note: I contacted Les Ferreira, and he said, "Dr. Bob McNeil (Fruit Science) was also very instrumental in early Chapter activities. Cal Poly had a small demonstration orchard near the railroad tracks with an extensive selection of citrus. They even grew babaco papayas on the hill by the campus radio tower. Meetings were occasionally held at the Crops Unit. The early scion exchanges were at Joe Sabol's place, but the activity became so popular that it was moved to Cal Poly."

In the early days, there were a lot of connections with the CRFG California chapter and CRFG members in other areas. The importance of this can't be overstated. Long-time CRFG members in other locations had already developed varieties that grew well in California, and they shared those with local members. The sharing continues through scion exchanges. Many of the varieties are named after some of the early members. That helps the group honor the work of the early "pioneers."

Jack said "We connected with people who I was somewhat familiar with through my earlier travels down to San Diego, which was the "Mecca" of the early CRFG. John Moore and I would travel down there, and we often went to a place called "Langdon's Lychees" which was a "nursery" owned by a member of the San Diego CRFG. I acquired several longans and lychee trees in pots from that place, and I learned how easy they are to kill. Some of them hated our water with its dissolved solids. I have since planted lychees from Florida and they seem to be doing OK now that we are getting water from Santa Maria which is connected to the State Water project."

Clytia Chambers was responsible for doing the CRFG magazine (The Fruit Gardener). She and her husband, Bob Chambers, had a 10-acre orchard of white sapotes down south. It was a huge collection. About 5 years ago a bunch of us went down there and we wandered around collecting scion wood of all the different varieties he had collected. Bob Chambers came to visit us after that, but sadly both he and his wife Clytia, have passed on. There is a white sapote growing back here with the name 'Clytia.' The scion wood that we collected from Bob's orchard is here and at Robert Scott's place and at other places. We still share that scion wood with people who want to grow the different varieties."

Side note: You can read about the Bob Chambers sapote collection in an article titled "If You Like Custard, This Fruit's for You" from October 24, 1991. It's available at this link: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-10-24-nc-100-story.html>

The group also connected with Harvey Correia, who lives up in the Stockton area. Harvey had a lot of contacts. Jack said "We traveled all over Southern California with Harvey one year. He would say 'I know a guy' and then we would make arrangements to visit the guy that was raising these rare fruits. Harvey has a web site with some interesting pictures of our trip to Bob Chambers' property. You'll see the cast of characters like Robert Scott, the hard-core characters who went

down to San Diego County to take advantage of this one opportunity to get part of Bob Chambers collections.”

Note: Harvey Correia’s Web site is at <https://whitesapote.com/>

Jack also made a connection with Orton Englehart. Regarding Orton, Jack said “He invented the Rainbird sprinkler system. John Moore took me to his place. I’ve got a bunch of Orton Englehart’s cherimoyas and some other stuff here that is correctly labeled. There is a cherimoya named Orton and another one named Englehart.”

I asked Jack about the fruits they were interested in growing when the group first started. He said “They were not apples. They were cherimoyas, macadamias, white sapotes, every uncommon and difficult fruit. There were kiwis, but they have since turned into a commercial crop, so kiwis are no longer so interesting to us. In the early days, we would go down to the San Diego area and get the ones we wanted. Somebody would be growing things in a pot, and sometimes we would get scion wood. There were a lot of failures, but the main thing is that people were just interested in doing this. ”

Jack says, “I brought back a lot of seeds from Mexico” and then he makes sure to point out to Jenny (a former agriculture inspector) that he cleared them through the Ag Inspection at the border. “We used to collect a lot of fruit in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Southern Baja. A lot of plants that I collected in Mexico were from people’s back yards, or we had the kids in these families collect fruit. They enjoyed doing it. Subsequently, forward in time, four of those kids from two different families from Guadalajara were our exchange students in Nipomo. They went to the local schools and learned English. Now some of them are hitting 50. Well, some of the guavas here are from those little kids.”

Jack continued “The number of rare fruits that we had when this chapter began has grown exponentially. I was told by nurserymen that they wouldn’t grow here, but that is a challenge for me. We killed a lot; we just don’t talk about it. Now you’re seeing people pushing these things to grow up in more northern areas, even San Francisco.”