

Historical Ramblings

Lompoc's Agricultural Legacy

Lompoc's agricultural heritage began with the Franciscan fathers of La Purisima Mission. The padres planted many acres of beans, wheat and barley, becoming the first experimental horticulturists in the valley. Lush orchards and vineyards flourished in the narrow canyons. A prolific mission pear orchard was located at the mouth of Miguelito Canyon. When Jose Antonio Carrillo took over the land, later known as Rancho Vieja, he immediately had the orchard destroyed to preclude the church from taking it away from him.

Early Lompoc colonists built on the success of the horticultural endeavors of the padres. In place of the ancient pear orchard, apples were planted. The resulting fruit won many prizes in world expositions until the codling moth and a dwindling market destroyed the local apple industry. In its formative years, the Lompoc colony also became home to highly successful and popular cherry and walnut orchards.

At the turn of the 20th century, the valley was the home of the mustard seed. Wild mustard had always grown in abundance throughout California. It was so abundant locally that, in the first years of the colony, as much as two dollars and fifty cents per day were earned from selling the seed of this wild plant. In 1880, J.P. Ball introduced English mustard. This variety was so prolific that Lompoc soon led the world in mustard production. 26,490,000 pounds were shipped from the Lompoc Wharf in 1886. By 1933 an average of more than 35,000,000 pounds of seed were produced annually. At one time, Lompoc proudly produced 90 percent of the mustard seed grown in the United States. Local mustard production also had its seamy side. During World War One, mustard grown in Lompoc was used to manufacture deadly mustard gas.

Lompoc also has a rich legacy of vegetable production. Potatoes, beans, sugar beets, onions, wheat, barley and corn were the first stable products of the valley. Carrots, lettuce, cauliflower, celery and broccoli soon followed. The cool climate of the lower valley and the fertile soil, twenty feet deep in some places, provided perfect conditions for the success of these crops. Truck loads of produce leave the valley on a daily basis, their cargoes bound for dinner tables all over the United States.

Lompoc's most famous claim to fame, however, is the production of flower seed. The valley's ideal combination of temperature, moisture and soil was discovered by accident. In 1907, John Smith, a Scotsman familiar with the problems of sweet pea production in the dampness of England, arrived in the valley. He suggested to local bean farmer Robert D. Rennie, that he try growing sweet peas. Rennie agreed, planting half an acre. The successful crop caught the eye of a bean seed buyer from the Burpee Seed Company, who sent information to W. Atlee Burpee. Burpee rushed to Lompoc to place hundreds of acres of sweet peas under cultivation. The famous Burpee Floradale Farm had its beginnings in those sweet pea fields. Today's multi-flora sweet pea was developed in Lompoc. The hardy, aromatic flower produces larger, more abundant blossoms than its primitive ancestors. David Burpee spent five years producing an odorless marigold, involving a crew of specialists crawling through the fields sniffing for one plant in a million without odor. Although a great success in flower development, it was not accepted by the public. Customers complained that rabbits and Japanese beetles destroyed the odorless plants, whereas they never bothered the ordinary odor carrying marigolds.

Lompoc's flower seed production diminished due to economics. As more home gardeners turned to pre-grown "pony packs," demand for seed decreased. In addition, growers, bowing to the pressures of increased production costs, began moving operations to Mexico and South America, taking advantage of cheaper land and labor. Adapting to the changing market, local growers began producing flowers for the cut flower industry. The phrase "Here today, gone tomorrow" is appropriate for these fields, as the flowers may be in full bloom today and harvested tomorrow, on their way to flower markets throughout the world.