

# The Zest S11E2

**Tom:** [00:00:00] You eat rice. The rice don't make you happy, you know, or maybe depending on the type of cereal, maybe a bowl of cereal. But when you're eating avocados, there's usually an event when you're eating an avocado and people are going to have smiles on their face.

**Dalia:** I'm Dalia Colon and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm.

**Dalia:** The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State. Today, are Florida avocados really the pits?

**Dalia:** Super Bowl Sunday is a big day for football and guacamole. But how much do you really know about avocados? Specifically, the green variety, which are also called Florida avocados. Today, we're doing a deep dive with Tom Siddons. He and his wife own Sleepy Lizard Avocado Farm in the Everglades, where they grow and ship avocados, mangoes and other tropical fruits. Tom also hosts the uber [00:01:00] popular Sleepy Lizard YouTube podcast about their farm. In our conversation, Tom shares why he got into the avocado business and offers tips for planting the best tasting avocados right in your own backyard.

**Tom:** My name is Tom Siddons. I'm the owner of Sleepy Lizard Avocado Farm, which is a 17 acre tropical fruit farm in Homestead, Florida. Our primary crop is avocado, which is probably about 60 percent of what we grow. I would say mango constitutes about another 25%. And then the remaining 15 percent would be different types of rare. tropical fruit: carambola, caimito, mamey, sapodilla, monstera deliciosa, stuff you really don't see in grocery store shelves.

**Dalia:** Wow. What is a Florida avocado [00:02:00] and how is that different than any other avocado?

**Tom:** Avocados are heterozygous, just like human beings. We've got amazing genetic diversity. You know, if you look at a squirrel, they all look alike, right?

**Tom:** But human beings, every one of us looks different. We're different heights, weights, you know, different eye color, different hair color, things like that. Because we carry the genes from our parents and our parents parents and etc. all the way on down the line, right? And that's how all of a sudden you wind

up with like a surprised red headed kid, you know, somewhere down the line, right?

**Tom:** Similarly with avocados, every single avocado seed is a random genetic variation. These are both the same variety avocado taken from the same tree. But if I plant the seed from this one, the fruit it gives will be different than these. In the 1920s, a guy by the name of Rudolph Hass planted some seeds in his yard and he cloned a popular [00:03:00] variety from then called the Fuerte.

**Tom:** One of the Fuerte clones failed and so his planted seed grew all the way to maturity. and produced avocados. Those are the avocado. Yeah. Yeah.

**Dalia:** Hass avocado or Hass avocado. That was sort of a mistake originally.

**Tom:** Like, like penicillin. It was an accident that someone stumbled into. Yes. And not only that, he wanted to cut the tree down, but his daughter loved the taste of the Hass avocado so much that she convinced him to keep it. He named it the Hass and he sold a license for \$5,000 to a local, what's what we call a nursery man, a guy who owns a tree nursery. And he took cuttings from that original house and we use a technique called grafting, which is a cloning technique. We take a cutting from a tree.

**Tom:** We like And we graft it, we fuse it into [00:04:00] a seedling that's just a seedling grown from any old random seed. Because when we plant the seedling, we don't know what we're going to get. And it takes 10 years to find out. But if I plant this seed and I wait about five months and I go out and I take a cutting from a known variety and I clone it, I, I fuse it into the seedling grown from this seed and then I only allow that to grow, I get a replica of the tree I took the cutting from.

**Dalia:** Okay.

**Tom:** We essentially, we plant a tree inside a tree. So that nurseryman, he took Rudolph Hass's cuttings and created his own replicas. clones of the tree that was in Rudolph's yard. And then he sold those to other people who took cuttings and made their own trees. To the point that there are four billion Hass variety avocados eaten every year around the globe.

**Tom:** No, four billion with a [00:05:00] B. With a B, which means there's over a million. trees that are all clones from that original accidental tree planted in La Habra Heights, California in the 1920s by Rudolph Hass.

**Dalia:** So cool. Okay. So there does seem to be a difference when you just look at them between a Florida avocado or a green avocado and a Hass avocado.

**Dalia:** What are some of the differences that we see and what are some that we don't see? Maybe we taste or. In the texture, things like that.

**Tom:** So the Hass avocado, that's 95 percent of the market in North America. The other 5 percent are what people call the Florida avocado. And that's the first, I would say, clarification I would like to make. It's not really the Hass versus the Florida or the Hass versus other. Hass is just one of hundreds of different varieties. About 50 to 60 of which [00:06:00] we also happen to grow here in Florida. So the Hass grows good in California. It grows good in Mexico. It grows good in Peru. And that's accompanied with other varieties like Fuertes and Butano and things like that, but they use those mainly for pollination.

**Tom:** Then over here in Florida. We grow what people typically call the Florida avocado, but it's really not that simple. It's easier if you think about it like apples. So these are Monroe variety avocados.

**Dalia:** Okay, you're holding them up. And they're the ones I think of as a Florida avocado. Green, smooth, larger than a Hass avocado.

**Tom:** Correct. Not as oily, right? There's another variety called Choquette that I pick right before these. They're a lighter green, they're more oval shaped, and they're almost twice the size. We have one called a Russell. It tastes like butter and it looks like a little smaller than a bowling pin. It looks like a big squash.

**Tom:** We've got little ones called [00:07:00] Lula, which are very high in oil. The skin gets really scratchy. It gets a, it gets a scar. Well, not that your listeners can see it, but I'm showing you some scarring on an avocado.

**Dalia:** Now, if I saw that at a grocery store, I wouldn't want that one. Cause it's got like a big Brown scar.

**Dalia:** That would be a mistake, wouldn't it?

**Tom:** Well, okay, so here's the thing. People shop with their eyes, not with their stomachs, right? You go to every farmer's backyard here in South Florida, they're going to have a Lula tree growing for themselves. But I grow some commercially because I have like a specialty customer base because of my social media following.

**Tom:** But Publix, Kroger's, Giant Market, Walmart, they are never going to take a Lula because it's so scarred and scratchy. Right. It's just susceptible to the fungus that causes this. These we can spray and keep them clean. Now it's late in the season and I stopped spraying. That's why you see it on this one, right?

**Tom:** But the Lula also has a very large [00:08:00] seed and not a lot of flesh. However, it tastes delicious. Okay. We have another one called the Brogden. It tastes like a pistachio nut. The skin is so thin. You actually eat it like an apple. You can chew and swallow. You can chew and swallow the skin.

**Tom:** Yeah. And then my buddy up the street, much like Rudolf Hass discovered the Hass, he's got one.

**Tom:** He discovered just a random, grew random from seed. We're calling it the Bumpycado. It's got all these gnarly bumps all over it. And when you cut that guy open, the skin is, is about as thick as a walnut seed. And so where I'm going with that is everyone knows the Hass that's 95 percent of the market.

**Tom:** And then they see these big fat green ones usually imported from the Dominican Republic. When they're imported, that means they're typically picked a little too early. They're chilled. Sometimes they're gassed when they get to the United States and all that handling damages the cellular [00:09:00] structure and you wind up with watery, not so flavorful avocados, and that's why a lot of people reject the non Hass or what they typically call the Florida or the green skin or the Caribbean avocados.

**Tom:** But the fact is, it's not. Just like apples, you've got a Macintosh, a Golden Delicious, a Honey Kiss, you know, all those ones. It's the same with avocados. We've got Lula, Brogden, Russell, Black Prince, uh, Catalina, Hall, all these different varieties, all of which make up 5 percent of the market. And then you got that one has that's 95%.

**Tom:** It just got really popular. The characteristics that we care about as growers are first of all, flavor. If it doesn't taste good, it's a non starter. Nobody cares, right? So when you do plant one from seed, there's guys we call seedling hunters. Their job, they just plant seeds, thousands of seeds. They wait.

**Tom:** 12, 15 years for those trees to produce fruit, [00:10:00] then they taste them. If the fruit tastes good, they keep them. If the fruit tastes bad, they discard them and start over. So I've got a mango, which this applies to mangoes too, right here in my backyard. It's a tester. It's called O15. It doesn't even have a name yet.

**Tom:** It's the seed that was in the pot in row O column 15. But it's, we think it's going to be a winner, right? So then after it tastes good, and like I say, we're talking about avocados, but this other fruit that doesn't, the term we're talking about is growing true to seed. Some stuff grows true to seed, other things don't.

**Tom:** And that gets back to that term I used earlier, heterozygous. The less true to seed you are, the less the seed grows up to look and be genetically like the mother. The more heterozygous, the more mix of other genes from all over the place that this tree randomly mutates into, right? So once we know it tastes good, now we need to see does it [00:11:00] produce every year?

**Tom:** Because the best tasting avocado in the world does no good for me if it only produces every third year. Or every other year. We call those alternate bearing fruit. Some fruit produces one year and not the other. Some will have a heavy year, two light years, heavy year, two light year. We don't want that. We want it to taste good.

**Tom:** We want it to produce every year.

**Dalia:** I mean, I could talk to you all day, but you said you want it to taste good. You want it to produce every year and you've got this. YouTube show called [00:12:00] Guac Talk that's got what over 100, 000 subscribers, which is ironic because you were trying to get out of tech and now here you are, you know, tech is aiding you in this new business that you have, but you have an episode called "How to Start Your Backyard Avocado Paradise." And I had a lot of people asking me on social media questions around how to grow avocados. I mean, they, they don't want the ones that are gassed that are coming from other countries. They want to just pick one right off the tree. So could you give me like just a couple of tips for getting started with this?

**Dalia:** Maybe there's a variety that tends to work better in Florida or just sort of helping people avoid the pitfalls, no pun intended.

**Tom:** Number one, the USDA hardiness zone. You need to know the USDA hardiness zone for the zip code. You live in, there's a lot of people who just want to grow something. They fuss with it, they fight with it.

**Tom:** And then all of a sudden there's a freeze or some type of conditions occur and the thing dies. If you grow within your USDA hardiness zone, whatever [00:13:00] you're growing will thrive. So that's step number one, figure out what hardiness zone you grow in. If you want to grow avocado, you need to be in zone eight, a or above.

**Tom:** Next you want to think about cold hardiness. So I'm in 10 B I don't have to worry about cold hardiness. I mean, we might get a frost every 12 or 15 years, but if you're up around Jacksonville, you're up around Tallahassee, Heck, it even snows up that way sometimes, right? So some avocados are cold tolerant, some of these varieties.

**Tom:** Other varieties are not. The Hass we talked about happens to be a cold tolerant variety. This variety here I'm holding is called a Monroe. That's a cold tolerant variety. The most cold tolerant variety is called the Oro. Negro, which means black gold in Spanish and it grows green. And when it's ready to pick, it turns black on the tree.

**Tom:** It turns this beautiful, shiny black color, [00:14:00] and it'll survive drops overnight down into the teens for a few hours. So that's item number two. You want to make sure. That you, if you're in a place where you get frosts and freezes, you want to make sure the tree that you're growing is cold hardy. There's one I grow that's the Simmons.

**Tom:** It's delicious, but it's not cold hardy. I wouldn't recommend that one for northern Florida. Okay, so that's number two. Number three, you need to think about space. You need to go out in your backyard. And plan yourself, you know, where are you going to put the trees and you really have to be disciplined and use your imagination because when you take a tree home and it looks like a Charlie Brown Christmas tree, it's just this cute little thing in a pot, you think, Oh, I could put these every five feet.

**Tom:** No, no, no. In about three or four years, you're going to have a monster. It would be just like you take a baby home from the hospital and you think they're going to wear them cute little shoes when they're teenagers. You know what I mean? These trees grow. And so you [00:15:00] probably want to give a radius of a minimum of 16 feet for the spacing, but the tree, you're going to allow it to branch out eight feet because the other tree is going to be coming this way.

**Tom:** So you need 16 feet. Some people will plant. to 12 feet or even 10. We call that high density planting. You can do that. You just have to prune more. You have, you'll have to augment your soil with a lot more fertilizer because you'll have more, you know, it's just like having more people to your house for dinner.

**Tom:** You got to add more food to the table, right? Number three, you got to think about irrigation here in Florida and most places that avocados grow tend to be climates that have a rainy season and a dry season. And during that dry



season, when your trees are young in the first day 67 years, you need to irrigate them about every fifth day, maybe once a week.

**Tom:** So you need to have irrigation that's going to cover all of your trees. So that's another thing [00:16:00] you need to plan for. Now the next step would be shade. Avocados love sun. So if your neighbor has a big fat oak tree that's going to block a certain portion of your backyard, For six hours a day of sunlight.

**Tom:** You don't want to plant in that spot, or if you do, you have to set your expectations that that plant, that tree is not going to thrive as well as another one that's got sun all day. Okay. So that's another consideration. And then the big thing we talk about in the Guac Talk podcast is taste the varieties before you go out and buy them.

**Tom:** Don't trust what someone else tells you, because we all have our own individual and unique taste. Don't we? I mean, you know, you may love. I can't stand egg salad. You might love it. I don't know. You know what I mean? Okay. Well,

**Dalia:** okay. So let me ask you. That's such a great question. What's your favorite variety and how do you like to enjoy it?

**Tom:** Lula plain right out of the husk with nothing [00:17:00] in it. So that scabby scarred little guy I told you about that all the farmers have in their backyard. blows your mind when they're ready. I cut them in half. I remove the seed. I take a spoon. Maybe I'll put a little salt on it or eat. I'm just playing with a spoon right out of the husk.

**Tom:** Eat half of it. It's delicious like that.

**Dalia:** Yeah. Okay. You said you have 17 acres and then we, we tried to do the math. We weren't very successful with the math, but how many Avocado trees do you have on your property?

**Tom:** Over a thousand, a thousand avocado trees and probably 500 mango trees. Yeah.

**Dalia:** Wow. Okay. I mean, I could talk to you all day and people are going to have to check out your podcast.

**Dalia:** It's on YouTube Guac Talk, which is. Fantastic. Why do you think it's so popular? I was honestly surprised that a podcast about avocados had more than

100,000 subscribers. So what do you think's going on there? Why are people so into this?

**Tom:** I think it was two things. I think number [00:18:00] one, during the pandemic, people got sort of, first of all, they had time to kill.

**Tom:** So the YouTube watching went up. Secondly, people became very interested in at home food production. And then the algorithm starts feeding you to other channels. And then, you know, people ask me, Oh, I talk about fruit too, but I can't get a viewership. And I, I, I mean, I don't know what to say to that. I mean, I, I watch a guy that carves like wooden tools using old antique tools over in Ireland.

**Tom:** I he's just likable. I mean, I don't know how to say it without like sounding like egotistical, but you have to be likable on camera. You know what I mean? And I've been a salesman all my life. And I think I just have this way of communicating that. People want to stay tuned in or something, I guess. But you know, people ask me all the time, like, what can I do to get my channel popular?

**Tom:** And I'm like, well, did you ever hear the song Africa? You know, that song Africa? Yeah. Toto, Toto, right. Can you name another song by them?

**Dalia:** Absolutely not. [00:19:00]

**Tom:** But yet Africa, you hear like every day, right? So even people who figure out how to get an audience can't do it a second time. And I know someone's going to say Rosanna, which is another Toto song, but not nearly as popular as that.

**Dalia:** Fair enough. And it takes a couple of minutes. Right. It's a two hit wonder. Wow. No, I definitely think it's you. People want to spend time with you. You're their companion. Final question. You started this As a way to generate income from the property that you live on, which was so smart and forward thinking, do you see it as more than that now?

**Dalia:** Have you sort of fallen in love with avocados? And if so, why?

**Tom:** I've fallen in love with avocados and the tropical fruit business. I would say the main reason is because of my customers. I pick and ship on Mondays. My wife and I are extra happy. on Mondays. When I'm up in my picking machine, I'm 16 feet high and I'm [00:20:00] reaching out for one of these.



**Tom:** You know, I would not send this to a customer. This has been rubbing against a branch, you know.

**Dalia:** Okay, you're holding one of these green ones that has a scar that probably wouldn't look so beautiful at Publix.

**Tom:** Correct. Or in a box, you know, I ship 10 pound boxes to individuals, you know, all around the country.

**Tom:** And I just think of them and I think, Oh, they're going to get this box at their doorstep. And it's going to make them happy because When you're eating avocados, something fun is happening. It's taco Tuesday night. You're watching a game. You're celebrating Cinco de Mayo. There's usually an event when you're eating an avocado and people are going to have smiles on their face.

**Tom:** And I'm, I try to be very aware of. that, you know, as I'm working and packing and shipping, driving to UPS to drop off my boxes. And I think that's one of the main reasons I fell in love with it so much as I just, I'm so grateful to have this awesome customer base to are also fans of social media. And I go on YouTube channel.

**Tom:** [00:21:00] People are so nasty on YouTube, but my commenters are always really nice. I mean, every now and then I get it. You know, someone, but they're so nice and sweet. And I feel like I've gotten to know them over the years and an order comes in. It's a name I recognize. I get happy. I just, I just love my customers.

**Dalia:** I love that you bring the party. I never thought about it that way, but if you're eating an avocado, it's a good day. Tom, this has been fantastic. And I know you have so much more information to share. So again, your YouTube podcast is called Guac Talk. And then what's the website if people want to become subscribers to your avocados?

**Tom:** The YouTube channel is Sleepy Lizard, and the website where I sell the fruit is [guac farm.com](http://guacfarm.com), [G-U-A-C-F-A-R m.com](http://G-U-A-C-F-A-R m.com).

**Dalia:** Awesome. Thank you. This was a blast. I learned so much in such a short amount of time. You're fantastic. Thank you. I really appreciate it.

**Tom:** You're welcome.[00:22:00]

**Dalia:** Tom Siddons owns Sleepy Lizard Avocado Farm in the Everglades. Thanks to Sonya Bryson Kirksey, you may know her as the National Anthem singer for the Tampa Bay Lightning, for suggesting this episode. What do you want to hear on the podcast? Send your Zest guest suggestions to info at [thezestpodcast.com](mailto:thezestpodcast.com) I'm Dalia Colon.

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