

Old World crops may revitalize northend

▶ Niland venture cultivating next generation of farming

By BRIANNA LUSK
Staff Writer

Against the backdrop of an ancient shoreline once traveled by Native Americans and not far from the east bank of the Salton Sea is a Mediterranean countryside.

Lush green orchards sprawl under the mountains, where citrus, figs and olive trees are growing despite the craggy landscape a stone's throw away.

"It took a long time to get where we are," Don Barioni Jr. said.

On the surface the location of the Imperial Plantation Farm and Nursery appears far from ideal, but Barioni and his partners have found a sweet spot.

The combination of planting on a slope near a warm body of water creates a frost-free climate and ideal drainage, Barioni described. The orchards' ability to endure was proven when the January 2007 freeze destroyed many crops in the Valley.

Imperial Plantation's orchards, fortunately, escaped major damage.

"It creates a microclimate called a banana belt," Barioni, managing partner of Imperial Plantation, said.

The orchards span more than 2,000 acres north of Niland, where Barioni farms for his business as well as other clients. Also, Barioni aids investors in consulting, developing and managing



their orchards. Another 100 acres boasts an ornamental tree nursery, specializing in desert-raised palms and other trees used for commercial and residential beautification.

Barioni has expanded the land over the years, from growing citrus to currently growing olives that will be used in creating California fresh olive oil.

As a fourth-generation farmer, Barioni said he grew up working on the farm. He never had any doubt that he would return after studying in college.

For Barioni the draw of keeping crops on the land changed the way he looked at farming. While in college at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, the San Joaquin Valley was phas-



PHOTO PROVIDED BY IMPERIAL PLANTATION FARM & NURSERY

ABOVE: A view of young fig trees planted on land previously used to grow tomatoes in the Imperial Valley's northend near Niland.

TOP LEFT: Don Barioni Jr. holds a bottle of extra virgin olive oil at his El Centro office. BOTTOM LEFT: A five-year-old fig tree at the Imperial Plantation Farm & Nursery near Niland bears immature fruit that will ripen and be ready for harvest in May.

BELOW: Barioni describes a fruiting olive tree at his farm near Niland on the Imperial Valley's northend. He says his interest in olives began 20 years ago during a trip to Argentina where he saw a centuries-old olive grove still in production.

JOSELITO VILLERO PHOTOS



ing out cotton and alfalfa for tree crops.

"My partners share the same vision. San Joaquin transformed 20 years ahead of us," Barioni said.

The region Barioni farms in the Northend used to be home to a tomato farm operation. The rising cost of hand-picking eventually forced it out of the area and the Barionis acquired the land over time. The land used to host more than 2,000 acres of jobo and lemons, but the jobo mechanical harvest could never be perfected.

Over time Barioni began experimenting with figs, pomegranates and in the last couple of years, olives for olive oil.

Using micro sprinkler delivery and water and salt-monitoring systems, Barioni said the Imperial Valley is poised to host more Mediterranean crops in the future.

"This is a way to make marginal ground productive," Barioni said.

Currently the plantation is hosting a 40-acre commercial trial with dozens of olive varieties including Spanish, Italian, Greek and mission. Using a converted grape harvester, in the fifth year the process can be completely automated. Barioni said

he has plans to expand to another 160 acres in the next year.

Barioni was convinced after a trip to Argentina where he witnessed 400-year-old olive orchards that were planted in the 1500s still producing oil. He said he hopes to convert part of his ornamental acreage into growing olive stock for other farmers to get into the business.

"I'm truly thinking more vertically integrated development including a processing plant for the olive oil crop. Within 10 years there could be a multi-million-dollar processing plant in the Valley," Barioni said.

The seed and skin of the olives can be used for cattle feed and other by-products can be used for green energy, he said.

So far Barioni's success has been based on taking a little risk and doing what he loves. The best advice he got from his father, he said, was making sure you love what you do.

In the last six years, he has successfully grown figs for a leading national fig company, filling the gap through the off-season by creating high-density plantings.

"It seems to be working," Barioni said.

Married to his childhood sweetheart for more than 25 years, Barioni said he and his wife, Angela, have been farming together since they were 15 years old.

Although he has grown row crops before, Barioni said he enjoys being able to nurture the trees year after year. With the help of a dedicated staff, Barioni said the orchards allow him to have a rewarding pace of life and work.

"A tree crop may be day to day but not hour to hour," Barioni said. "My staff has been with me for decades and they are able to find a place in the orchard to do what they do best."

Although the region has come so far from where his pioneer family started, Barioni said farming remains difficult as technology and regulations evolve.

Being able to leave something behind for the next wave of farming, he said, is what he works hard to accomplish.

"Farming is a way of life; it's everything 24-7," Barioni said. "It's our way of life."

Maybe decades from now, his orchards will still be standing.

"We hope it's going to be here for generations."

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