

Camarillo church temporarily sacrifices avocado trees to save on water

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CAMARILLO, Calif. - Dale Larson would often take his 3-year-old granddaughter, Anika Larson, to pick an avocado or two from the trees in the orchard that fronts Peace Lutheran Church on Las Posas Road in Camarillo.

Dale Larson, a member of the church council and finance board, said the approximately 90 avocado trees were planted on about 1½ acres of the 6-acre property back in the 1940s.

The church owns the property, and recently decided to remove the branches of the avocado trees, a method of pruning called “scaffolding,” in an effort to significantly cut water costs.

The pruning began Friday and is expected to be completed this weekend.

The trees will eventually grow back and bear fruit, but the church has been receiving several phone calls from concerned residents wondering why the trees were leveled to 4-to-5-foot stubs.

One phone call was from a neighbor of the church who said the orchard is one of the last remnants of what Camarillo used to be, surrounded by endless fruit trees and farms, and that the trees relax him when he sees them.

(<http://www.vcstar.com/thedrought>)

“People have called and said they don’t want another parking lot replacing the trees. They love this avocado orchard here,” said Dale Larson’s wife Marsha Larson, the church’s secretary.

Dale Larson said the mostly Hass and some Macarthur avocado trees were harvested by a company, generating a small profit for the church.

However, he said the cost of water for the church buildings and grounds doubled in the last year and was projected to run between \$15,000 and \$20,000 for the upcoming fiscal year.

The church was also listed as the 12th highest water user in the Pleasant Valley Water District.

The church council approved a plan presented by the board of finance to reduce the church’s water usage by doing radical pruning of all avocado trees on the church property. Income from the last harvest and water savings paid for the pruning.

“We are taught through the Bible that we are supposed to be good stewards of what God has given us. We can continue pouring water on the trees, but it just doesn’t make sense doing that in the middle of the drought,” Dale Larson said.

He said the California Avocado Commission recommended the scaffolding technique, as a means of drastically reducing the amount of water needed to keep the trees alive during the drought.

The branches that are removed will be chipped and spread throughout the orchard to prevent loss of moisture from the soil.

Eventually the trees will begin to sprout up again and form branches.

“In a couple years, they’ll start producing and probably double our production; that is if we can water again,” he said.

The church is expected to reduce its water usage by thousands of gallons of water each week, and save about \$5,000 to \$6,000 a year. The church is also looking to replace some of the lawn areas with drought tolerant plants.

Karen Raso, the church's keyboard player, said she was warned the pruning would take place, but was "surprised" when she first saw the tree stubs Friday.

"I didn't know the property was so big. It looks totally different," said Raso.

"It was lush, but the good part is that it will come back," said Sharon Fraser, a church member.

Marsha Larson pondered what the church's fall pumpkin patch festival will be like this year. In the past, the church would offer tractor rides through the avocado orchard.

"It's not going to be that much fun going through the stumps, is it," she said with a laugh.

Her husband reminded her that one must think positive about the change.

"It's going to look really sad for a bit," said Dale Larson.

"But, we kind of like the idea that anyone driving down this road can actually see the church now for the first time. Probably no one even knew were back here."

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