

Expanding Engagement through Podcasting

By Luke Milliron and Phoebe Gordon

Trying to find new and better ways to engage with clientele is a never-ending quest in extension. The University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Cooperative Extension ([UC ANR](#)) has a foundation likely very similar to other extension programs across the nation. We engage with clientele through one-on-one farm calls, texts, and phone calls, as well as larger scale efforts like newsletters, trade magazine articles, extension websites, and field and indoor meetings. We started a podcast as a new way to reach out to clientele. We wanted a way to create content that can be educational and informative at a time and place where we have not traditionally been engaging with our audience.

For those who work in agriculture, lots of time is spent behind the wheel, whether it is a truck, a tractor, or an ATV. There are also times when clientele may have questions or think of something they need to learn about or follow up on, but are not ideal times for reading an article, writing an email, or they can't get in contact with someone who could give them the answers they need. These periods are an opportunity for concise and practical extension education through podcasts.

Dr. Phoebe Gordon and I are county-based UC ANR orchard advisors separated by over 200 miles in California's Central Valley. As newly minted advisors in 2017 we spoke at our academic orientation and discovered that we were both avid podcast listeners and had independently been thinking about starting a podcast for orchard extension. Gordon lead the technical efforts of establishing a Square Space website domain and linking the posted audio feed to the podcast distributors iTunes and Google Play, and in late May 2018 our podcast "[Growing the Valley](#)" was launched.

Our format for the podcast is to interview UC ANR colleagues on subjects they have expertise in, or on research projects they are involved in. We have also branched out and interviewed other researchers, such as those associated with California State University campuses and the USDA. Farm advisors are typically generalists, and our episodes embrace this, with topics ranging from pests and diseases, to irrigation, fertilization, and horticulture. We have found that podcasting also allows us to extend information in subjects that we know are important but do not have personal or institutional expertise in. One example is pump efficiency, which is critical for effectively irrigating orchards, but an area that falls outside of the skillset of most research scientists. This subject is well within the wheelhouse of USDA agricultural engineers, and we were able to interview one for our series on irrigation. Another example is pecan production, which is a minor crop in California that is sometimes considered in areas prone to flooding. We were able to interview the New Mexico State University pecan specialist to address questions that California orchard growers may have when considering planting pecans.

In order to give timely information on orchard tasks, we also have "one-minute challenges" where we competitively list critical monthly orchard tasks by crop in under a minute, and then

discuss nuances after. To provide timely information, we post episodes at a weekly interval. In order to prevent listening fatigue and package need to know information in a concise message, we generally keep episodes between 10 and 20 minutes in length. There are many subjects that cannot be adequately covered during this time frame, so we also have series that delve more deeply into specific subjects over several episodes. Our first series was on navel orangeworm, the most significant insect pest of almond and pistachio, and the second series was on irrigation, the backbone of California agriculture. We have just debuted a third series on plant nutrition. This format allows us to focus on specific aspects of large and otherwise unwieldy subjects.

After nearly two years of podcasting, we are approaching 100 episodes and taking stock of what is working and our limitations. There is a lot we do not know about the podcast's impact. However, we have received notes of positive feedback from our local clientele, colleagues, and even researchers in other countries. Our podcast has been used as an educational tool for students at UC Davis and California State University, Chico. In addition, we have recently been given the opportunity to provide continuing education credits through the California Department of Food and Agriculture, a service we hope to have available by the end of April. This positive feedback is supported by the analytics, which this year showed year over year growth each month in unique iTunes devices. However, this growth stalled as COVID-19 re-shaped our lives in March, and we saw a 20% decline from the previous month. This decline is the exact figure quoted in Dr. Rose-Hayden Smith's article last month about [how COVID-19 is changing media consumption](#). We will be launching a survey this spring to better determine who our listeners are, whether they are learning and changing behaviors because of the podcast, and how we can improve this new extension tool.

Podcasting has its limitations. We can only share information that can be digested aurally. In addition, the niche we hope to be able to fill through educating clientele while they are driving to the next site or walking a field, may mean that listeners are not fully engaged with an episode. Podcasting also does not reach everyone, a [2019 poll by Edison Research](#) found that just over half of the U.S. population aged 12 and older, reported ever listening to a podcast. This figure could be even lower in agriculture because our clientele populations generally skews older and may have lower technology adoption rates. We also know that for those who listen to podcasts, there has never been more competition for our listening time. We are seeing this during the COVID-19 era as most podcasts are taking a backseat to podcasts dedicated to covering the virus.

Podcasting is not a replacement for any of the core components of extension programs. However, podcasting is a way to reach clientele at a new time and place. In addition, since episodes are available online, they can be listened to whenever clientele need specific information and can be relisted to as many times as necessary. Many thanks to Dr. Rose Hayden-Smith who encouraged us to write this article. Thanks also to the California Almond, Walnut, Pistachio, and Prune Boards who financially support our podcast. You can learn more about [GrowingtheValleyPodcast.com](#), and in our [eXtension Social Café](#) on podcasting on Thursday, April 23rd.