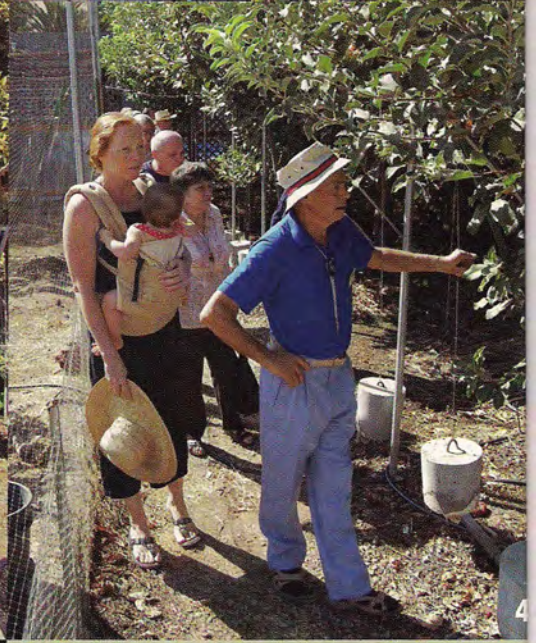
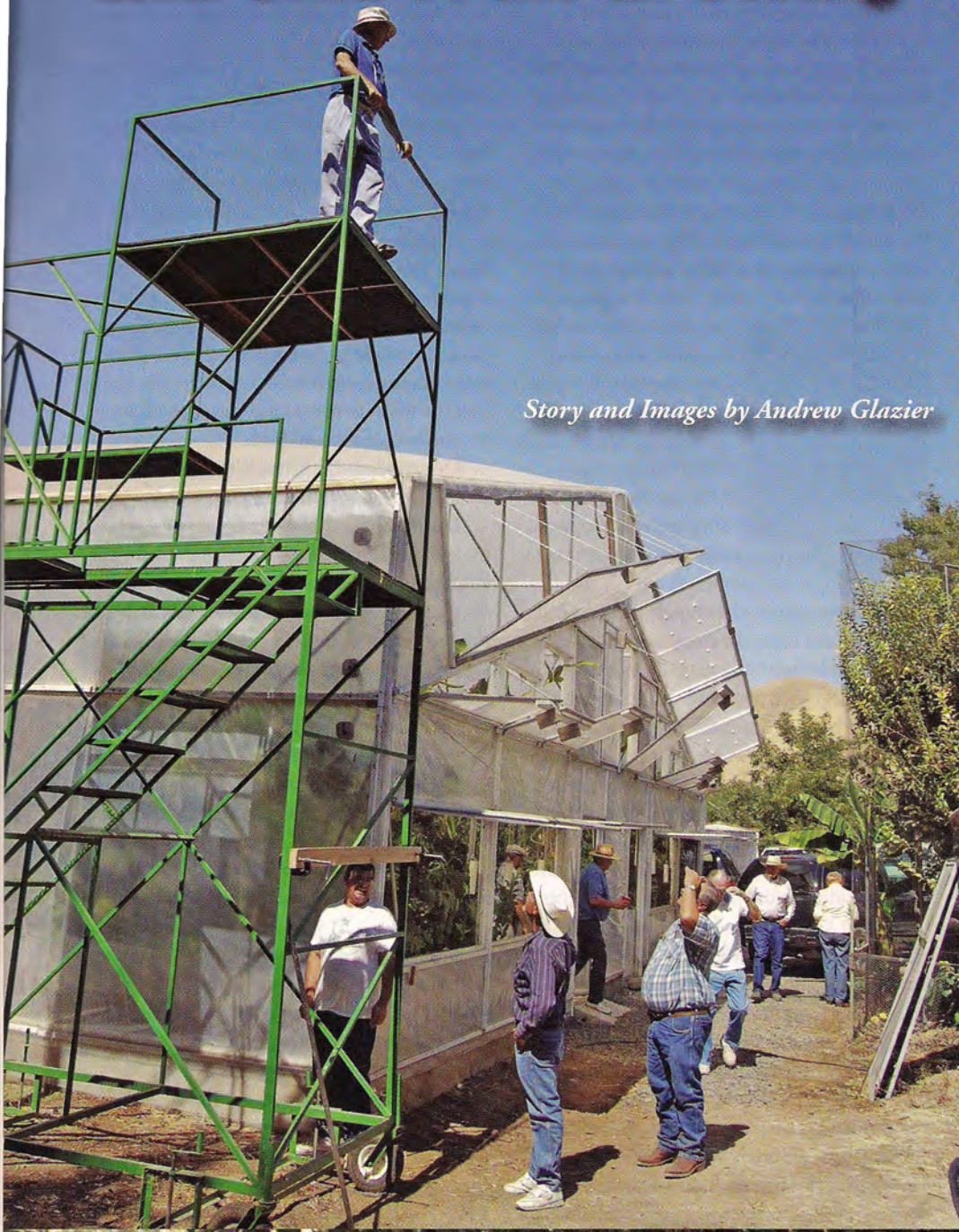


# The ultimate do-it-yourself project Extreme Fruit Growing

Story and Images by Andrew Glazier



**A**s I write this, my head is spinning. I have just arrived home from a meeting of the Sequoia chapter on a pool patio at the residence of Walter Thoma in the hills east of Porterville, Calif. I had been told that Walter is a wonderful person with astonishing drive and incredible greenhouses, so I was prepared... sort of.

(turn to page 12)

**Title image** Walter built this mobile scaffold to service the greenhouses and seasonally replace their plastic coverings. **1** The drive to the house is lined with Medjool dates. **2** Walter's fruit in the spathe of a Queen palm. **3** Enjoying ripe Jujubes. **4** An apple orchard under bird netting. **5** The height of the netting is impressive. **6** The entire grape crop is also enclosed. The birds outside chirp in disapproval. **7-9** A planting bed form ready for concrete; inside a greenhouse, a planting bed with espaliered tomato plants; planting beds outside. **10** One of many espaliered branches straining under the weight of peaches. **11** Another bird-proof orchard. **12** With winter approaching, Walter sun dries Thompson seedless grapes for raisins. **13** This cluster was two pounds. **14** Walter shows a bird release door.



## EXTREME FRUIT GROWING (from page 10)

I soon learned that I only thought I had seen elaborate greenhouses and extensive plant collections. Walter greenhouses outdid them all, completely exceeding my expectations. He has created a truly wonderful oasis which, even though he calls himself a hobby gardener, keeps him working daily from dawn to dusk.

The vast San Joaquin Valley is known to many as the breadbasket of the world. At the eastern edges of the valley, where the vast expanse of its flat floor meets the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, one can find many hidden canyons containing small farms and horse corrals. The grassy, oak-dotted hills are steep and quite dry, and in many places little else grows. Here and there farmhouses are surrounded with shade and fruit trees. To successfully garden in such places, one must carefully prepare the soil and add organic matter. Also drip irrigation is essential; water can be scarce and must be used sparingly.

As we traverse the arid landscape, driving along behind Eva and Martin Berghuis, my wife and I wonder what we will find. Then turning toward the hills, we see tops of date palms rising above the golden dry grass. Soon we are welcomed into a palm grove, much as traders on camels would be as they approach an oasis after a long journey. We are amazed to see healthy, vigorous banana trees lining the driveway. Medjool date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*) are laden with heavy bunches of near-ripe fruit. Behind the palms we see what appears at first glance to be a spaceship. Instead it is a greenhouse unlike any I have ever seen. The structure is at least thirty five feet tall and features an unusual ventilation system wherein large movable windows are opened to allow for ventilation. The windows are controlled by an amazingly simple system of pulleys and weights. I am able, with a feather-light touch, to control

the device and I try it a few times. Then we are called to the meeting and I have to tear myself away, but not before I spy a dragon fruit (*Hylocereus undatus*) crawling well up into the inside of the greenhouse. A white sapote (*Casimiroa edulis*) full of fruit stands proudly behind it.

Inside the pool area, the guests begin to sit down at a long table and admire its centerpiece—the bowl-like spathe of a Queen palm (*Syagrus romanzoffiana*), overflowing with luscious fruits Walter has grown. People are actually slow to take the fruit because it is so artfully displayed, like a still life from one of the old masters, taunting the viewer with its sensuous offerings. Eva stands up and quickly calls the group to order. She holds up a book about how to grow jujubes or Chinese dates. These fruits are somewhat apple-like, however, when they turn brown their sugars are more concentrated and they are quite refreshing. I find myself eating jujubes daily now, yet last month I only knew them as a brand of candy. As the meeting progresses, the fruit begins to disappear; gasps and exclamations of enjoyment force Eva to pound her wooden gavel to refocus the fruit lovers who are lost in amazement.

Let me stop here to refocus myself and assure the reader that this story is no exaggeration. I really am impressed with Walter and the literal fruits of his labor. At first glance I would have estimated his age as mid-sixties at most. He is quick, trim and approaches everything he does with a laser-like intensity. I was amazed to learn that he is in fact seventy two.

Walter espouses the virtues of raw food, and anyone seeing the results of his work cannot deny the fact that for him collecting and cultivating fruit trees isn't just a hobby; it is a big part of a healthy lifestyle and is quite similar to how some people have lived for generations. Other cultures revered their

fruit-producing plants and cared for them as their children. In our modern society we might grow a fruit tree and eat some fruit here and there. Walter eats most of what he grows. Anything not eaten is immediately composted, and the cycle repeats itself. I remember a native American friend I had in college who used to tell other students what their animal spirits were. I was a turtle. "Don't worry" he said, "Turtles live a long time." I imagine Walter's animal spirit is the humming bird. He is zipping about taking the natural sugars and is always working.

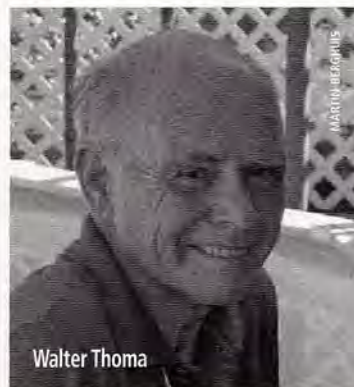
After the meeting we begin the garden tour. I soon learn that Walter has enclosed his entire apple crop, an area the size of a football field, in bird-proof enclosure of PVC pipes and hundreds of feet of netting. In parts of the San Joaquin Valley, like Walter's place and where I reside, ripe fruit is immediately attacked by birds. In 2008 I got exactly two peaches from a few hundred which were pecked open and left to spoil. Walter's protected fruit is flawless. I quickly notice many different types of apples on each tree. Walter explains that he has up to ten different varieties on each rootstock. We learn that he concentrates his efforts on fall apples like Fuji and Pink lady because summer apples tend to split when watered during heat spells during which the mercury often rises above 110F. The guests walk back and forth in the rows between the trees; an Alice in Wonderland feeling seems to fall upon the group as they pass by others coming the other way, sharing equally urgent stories of some apple "you just have to see." As with all the other fruit tasted this day, amazing is all I can say. I wonder at the purpose of the bucket-shaped casts of concrete hanging down at regularly spaced intervals, and learn that they are weights for keeping taut a system of wires running through the tree canopies, to which Walter fastens fruit-laden branches to prevent them



Each apple tree has ten cultivars top-worked



The greenhouse heights accommodate tall trees



Walter Thoma

from breaking.

At long last, Walter opens a door into another enclosure. We file inside, and there stands a tree with the fruit of the moment, the jujube (*Rhamnus zizyphus*). The branches appear to be near breaking with the weight of the brown, sugary-sweet fruit but like a stern mother, the tree hangs onto them until they are ready to go forth into the world. Some readers might wonder how birds could escape from these areas if they get lucky and get in. Well, Walter's bird-proof enclosures are not without a heart; he has welded a "bird-escape door" into each enclosure. Where other farmers would probably shoot the birds, he invented a way for them to escape unharmed.

We are next led into yet another bird-proofed structure, this one full of pears and peaches. Some of these trees' branches hang straight down with the weight of their fruit. Walter has rows of espaliered fruit trees that are trained for maximum fruit density while allowing for maximum airflow and sunlight. Typically espaliered fruit is meant for a wall, but Walter makes his own rules and is quite successful at it. Gigantic pears are sliced and handed about. I am shocked by their taste. I have never liked pears and yet these are great, much better than a store-bought pear.

We are led out of that enclosure and into the next one, which houses the grapes. I thought I knew what a good grape tasted like. I was wrong. We walk through rows of vines that are trained overhead like tunnels. This arrangement keeps the fruit cool while the leaves above continue their work. As Walter isn't growing for wine, it isn't necessary to withhold water, so he waters sparingly to keep his grapes moist and juicy. I am shocked at all the healthy, two-pound clusters before me. Red grapes, green grapes, blue grapes, oval-shaped, round—seemingly every color, size and shape is here. We are handing grapes back and forth and enjoying them, and I think I have seen it all, when something hits me like a city bus when I am handed a rather large, green grape. I pop it in my mouth and I don't just

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get a taste; I get a *fragrance* which dances up into my sinuses. I look at the people behind me who all have the same shocked expression. "Walter, what the heck is this one?" we all yell but too late—he is far, far ahead. I look back in agony as the plant disappears toward the rear of the tour as others shout out their love of the grape. I vow to return to get a cutting of whatever it is.

We are herded back for lunch which, of course, is incredible. The peach cobbler disappears in minutes. I realize as I collect my thoughts that Walter embodies the best of the rare fruit grower. He doesn't selfishly hoard knowledge and cuttings; he happily shares with others and asks for nothing in return. He is a testament to the healthful effects of eating natural foods in the same state that our forbears ate them for millennia. Rather than sitting around at some shuffleboard court, Walter continues to farm his land with the purest of intentions. Moreover, he is effective at it and the work helps him keep fit. He is indeed an appropriate ambassador for fruit and its benefits.

As we visit the last two greenhouses with roofs that reach for the sky, I am amazed to see a huge avocado tree inside the first one. Rather than control the height of the tree by cutting it back, Walter simply raised the greenhouse roof. Allowing the tree to develop a natural shape makes the understory available for other plants, and the overall production of the greenhouse is increased. Ladders are used when picking greenhouse fruit from up high, but to service the greenhouse windows and seasonal plastic outside, requires a mobile scaffold, an impressive device about twenty feet tall—which, like all his greenhouses and bird-proof enclosures, Walter fabricated from scratch. He climbs to the top of the scaffold accompanied by cheers from the fruit growers below. Clearly

he enjoys the adoration, but before long he swings down on the steel beams like a gymnast instead of dismounting via the stairs, and the last leg of the tour is on.

That night I lay in bed unable to sleep because the delicious but nameless grape I ate earlier that day keeps calling my name. I know if I finish the interview with Walter by phone, that grapevine will be bare and I won't know which one it was. So at three in the morning I am watching poker on TV and cursing myself for not getting the name of the grape. At eight-thirty my wife wakes me, and we are changing a diaper when I announce, "We're going back." Amy looks at me for a moment and then gives in because, as so many wives and husbands of plant fanatics know, it's pointless to argue. She knows I'm in tunnel-vision mode. I call Walter to ask if it's okay to come over and he welcomes us back. Soon after arriving, I point out the grape and Walter says, "Oh that one—it's called Golden Italia." At last I can exhale. He promises me some cuttings when the leaves drop in December.

As our second visit draws to a close Walter, characteristically, is working; as he talks he gathers Thompson Seedless grapes and spreads them on wooden tables where they will sun dry and become raisins. My wife, Amy, is an avid vegetarian cook, so she and Walter are of like mind and before long are trading notes on their favorite foods. Walter mentions that he takes no caffeine or beer, as the natural sugars of fruits and vegetables give him the most energy and enjoyment. He also tells us that he keeps hives on the property to ensure pollination. He is so well known by the local police for his skills with bees that he is called on occasion to remove swarms, which he brings back to his oasis along with the rare fruit growers who love his place too.



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