

Fresno County Farm Bureau

Friends of the Family Farm Sponsor

Gar Tootelian puts the customer first

While listening to Fresno's talk radio, tucked between the news, sports, weather and traffic, individuals might hear commercials aired by one of the oldest crop protection/fertilizer retailers in the nation, Gar Tootelian Incorporated (GAR). The voice in these commercials is that of Karen Musson, part of the second generation of Tootelian's that now runs the day-to-day operations. Karen's commercials talk of the importance of California agriculture to the state and nation, how much farmers should be treasured for the jobs and products they create and the lives they benefit.

GAR is located amongst the citrus groves between Reedley and Orange Cove. Owned and operated from the same location by the Tootelian family since 1949, the company is named after its founder, Gar. Crop Life Magazine's list of the top 100 retailers in America ranks GAR as the largest single-site, and 70th largest overall crop protection retailer in the nation.

Gar Tootelian himself was truly "home grown" – born, raised, educated, married and died in Reedley. Initially, Gar made a living farming, doing custom tractor work, purchasing fertilizer and selling it to his neighbors. It was because of the support of the D'Arrigo brothers, and other local growers, that he got started in the crop protection business.

Today, GAR supplies over 1,500 growers from Porterville to Chowchilla with crop care products and advice. GAR is now operated by the second generation of family members - Gar's daughters, Karen Musson and Linda Salwasser. The company distributes products for virtually every major crop care manufacturer including Dow Agro Sciences LLC, DuPont Crop Protection, Bayer CropScience and BASF Corporation. Additionally, GAR is a founding member of Independent Agribusiness Professionals (IAP), a national alliance of 37 independent agricultural chemical/fertilizer dealers with combined agricultural input sales in excess of \$2.4 billion annually, over 550 retail locations and over 2,000 licensed pest control/certified crop advisors.

A service oriented company

Greg Musson, Karen's husband, and the company's president, says that Gar had a simple business belief: "You take care of the customer, and he will take care of you." Greg mentored under his father-in-law for 15 years before taking the helm about 10 years ago.

"Gar had some great beliefs which I still focus on today," said Greg. "He believed that we are not in business to make needless and ill-timed recommendations. He also believed that we should always recommend the best product and/or solution for the job, not what makes us the most money. He knew that a grower's success and future was our success and future."

"GAR works hard to maximize the time PCAs spend in the field with their growers by minimizing PCA paperwork demands," said Greg.

"And, when we are fortunate enough to hire a new PCA, their customers are treated as family right from the beginning," said Karen. "The company believes in providing one level of service for everyone... the best."

Other grower provided services the company offers include OSHA regulatory advice and farm and food safety advice. The company has staff available to meet with growers to review their existing compliance programs and keep them updated. GAR's regulatory people also stand ready to assist growers with worker tailgate trainings. "If you are a grower and you are not in compliance, you are risking everything needlessly," said Greg. "Gar stands ready to help meet your regulatory needs, affordably."

Additionally, GAR's team of service people are available to keep micro and underground tape irrigation systems running like new. "Even in the most severe instances, GAR's team of irrigation specialists can free up a system and keep it running," said Greg.

"Our job is to add value to what we do. I don't want to be accused of pushing products or services our customers don't need. I measure success by how many customer complaints I get annually," said Greg. "One is too many."



Gar Tootelian Inc. has been family owned and operated since 1949. Karen Musson (left) and Linda Salwasser (right) are part of the second generation involved in the business. They are with their mother, Esther (center).

Staying progressive

GAR's PCAs meet regularly to review field activities and solutions. "We meet weekly with our manufacturers in the winter to go over new and existing products and field issues," said Greg. "From April through August, our PCA staff meets twice a month to focus on current field observations, spray timing, product solutions and communication/delivery issues."

The company has also begun a formal training and mentoring program for new PCAs, Field Scouts, Trap Checkers and other staff members. This year, they have scheduled a series of advanced in-house classes given by long-time staff PCAs and other industry people on such things as row crops, stone fruit, citrus, nuts, nutrition, time management and other critical industry issues. Their intent is to bring the 1,000 or so years of combined practical experience in 150 crops to interested staff members. "We are creating a library of practical insight that can be brought to staff members at any time," said Greg. "This could be something we expand to include for our customers [in the future]."

"We have to stay progressive," Greg explained. "We have our own software system that I make available to other independent retailers, like ourselves, as well as commercial applicators." GAR was also the first crop protection retailer in the nation to fully adopt Agrian Inc.'s recommendation writing system. "Today, Agrian Inc. represents the cutting edge of technology for the entire agricultural world," said Greg.

A way of life

GAR also farms approximately 350 acres of citrus and tree fruit. "Farming is a good, honorable living," said Greg. "You meet the best people that this country has to offer... where deals are still honored with a hand shake. Farmers are the type of people any business would love to have as customers."

GAR is actively involved in the community supporting dozens of local charities, schools and activities. Additionally, Gar Tootelian Inc. became a Fresno County Farm Bureau Friends of the Family Farm sponsor in early 2012 to express a greater commitment to the goals of Farm Bureau.

As Karen likes to say, "Gar Tootelian Inc. – big on service and locally grown at 800-696-6108."