Francois van der Merwe – Namakwaland Sitrus

Citrus, and Namaqualand flowers, on an accelerated calendar after May flood

© Namakwaland SitrusEarly mandarins and navelates are being picked in the Western Cape's Olifants River Valley, where, after yet another flood just over two months ago, packhouses are taking hands to stand by each other, says Francois van der Merwe of Namakwaland Sitrus (*right*). He is the packhouse manager of the group comprising three farms around Clanwilliam and, uniquely, a fourth farm near Lake Victoria in Uganda where potatoes are grown for a local chips factory, along with coffee.

Back in Namaqualand, a district famed for its springtime flower display, he observes that both the wildflowers and the fruit on the trees are early this season. "My wife and I are fourth generation on this farm, a family farm centred around our Christian values," Van der Merwe says.

He notes that the citrus harvest is early by two to three weeks, on all cultivars and in all orchards. Since the floods, they've experienced a warm autumn, and he reckons that the combination of the tremendous rain followed by warm temperatures sped up plant growth. Only now, he says, the winter's starting to feel proper cold.

"On our main farm where the packhouses are located, the Olifants River and the Jandissels River run side by side – hence the farm's name, Twee Riviere – and when the Department of Water Affairs was forced to open sluices upstream during the flood, the Jandissels River breached its banks in four places," he says.

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Van der Merwe credits the tight support network among citrus growers in the Olifants River Valley, and he lauds their marketer WP Fresh: they know the exporter has their back.

"Besides the fruit that you lose – and we're well aware that there were others who suffered greater losses than us – the earthmoving works to repair the eroded river bank are very expensive. So now one is faced with a lower crop (we reckon we lost about 10% of our crop) in a year with wars raging in the world. The Middle East is gone as a market, diesel prices have increased, the fruit's acid levels are all over the place – it's been a topsy-turvy year, but we're managing."

He continues: "We've got about ten weeks left in our citrus campaign. The loss of the Middle East is a loss of a market for our smaller counts and class 2 and even class 3. So now you're left with that fruit for which the usual market is closed. Fortunately, the United States, even with the tariffs on some of the citrus categories, remains a worthwhile proposition because of the continuing strength of the American Dollar."

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Vegetables become equal partner to citrus

Citrus has long been their main business, but vegetables are assuming more importance: the acreage under vegetables and field fruit now closely mirrors that of citrus. The planting season has kicked off in their valley: sweetcorn, baby marrows, green beans and watermelon. Twelve months of the year they have vegetables to pack into retailer programmes, to supply processors and to send to the Cape Town and Johannesburg wholesale markets.

"For many years," he says, "the narrative around vegetables was that it is a cash crop that you plant for a cash injection into your business, to tide you over until the next citrus crop, but that is definitely changing."

He notes that vegetables are difficult in that the market is smaller than on citrus – both domestically and overseas – but as they're opening up opportunities in vegetable marketing, they've become convinced of vegetables' ability to stand on their own feet (so to speak) and not merely as an adjunct until the following citrus season.

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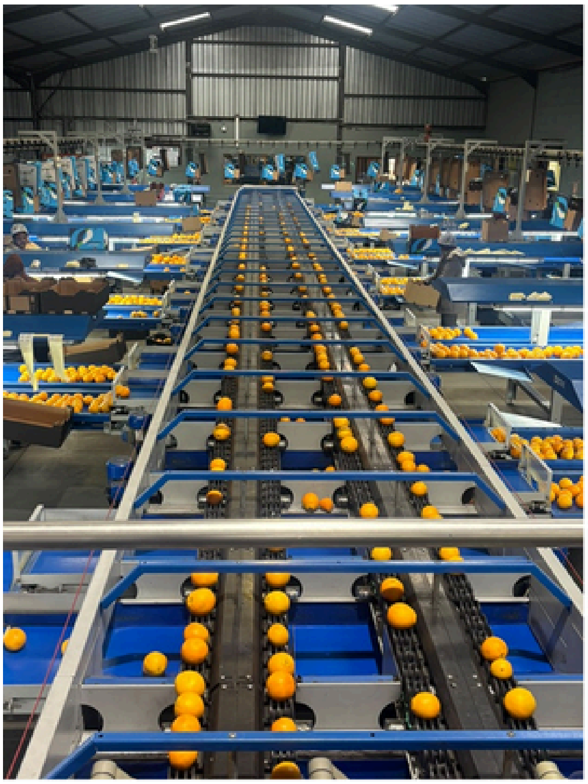
They recently started exporting butternuts to the UK and Europe. "We've got to think smarter about vegetables. The days of planting what you feel like and delivering it to market, hoping for the best, are over," he says.

"At the same time, smaller vegetable farmers are finding it ever harder to compete – what with increasingly stringent traceability concerns and auditing requirements. So that's led us to what we're doing on sweetcorn, primarily: we're not planting any sweetcorn ourselves this season, but we have the growers' programme from a couple of retailers, a couple of farms around us that we trust produce it for us. We buy it from them, we pack it, and we market it, and in the process we're getting smaller farms around us on board to move ahead."

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In the process, also, there is not a week of the year during which they're not putting something over the packline. Their thoughts have moved ahead to value addition of vegetables, but this is not the season to move rashly, he says.

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Publication date: Tue 14 Jul 2026

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