

Okkie Burger and Arno Mouton - Quattro Citrus South Africa: Start of citrus packing in Citrusdal

Today is the start of the packing season for Quattro Citrus. The firm began in 2014 with four shareholders, AMC South Africa being the fourth, managing the South African interests of the Muñoz Group. The other three directors are directly involved in the production and packing side.

Quattro Citrus, the operational arm of the company, packs the citrus of its own growers as well as for third party growers, and today it starts packing satsumas for the UK market where the market is still strong, says Okkie Burger, packhouse manager. "Citrus volumes are expanding in Citrusdal. We're the newest packhouse of the sixteen in the area but production is rising so much that about every three years a new packhouse needs to be built."



AMC South Africa handles its marketing. The main markets are the EU, the UK and the USA, with some going to the Middle East, the Far East and Russia, including those of third party producers. About 5% of its production is marketed in Africa and there is a growing market of informal trade, approximately 12%, that goes to street sellers. "The local market is also still strong and we expect good prices both internationally and locally."

Last year it packed 42 000 x 400kg-crates, roughly 700 to 800 000 cartons. Class 1 and 2 citrus makes up 80% of its production. Its degreening facility allows it to send citrus to markets earlier. "Fruit is degreened for between 24 and maximum 72 hours at 22°C and 95% humidity, but we have to do it very carefully. The disadvantage is that every 24 hours in degreening means a week's reduction in shelf life," Burger explains. The average time for their citrus to reach markets in the Northern Hemisphere is about six weeks: two weeks at Cape Town harbour and a further four weeks at sea.



According to their protocols, soft citrus has to be packed within seven days, hard citrus within ten days. At peak production packing goes on through the night.

The company, through AMC Fruit, is able to take advantage of new varieties developed by Source Citrus Genesis and is currently trialling 23 new varieties, including a mandarin with the same sweetness as Orri but with a lower tendency to vegetative growth.

To fill the gap between navels and MidKnights in mid-June and July, the company produces Tangos (Tang Gold in Spain), the mandarin at the centre of a legal battle regarding plant breeder's rights, based on its close genetic similarity to the Clemengold mandarin. At the moment, plant breeder's rights have been secured in South Africa and AMC handles about 50% of the variety planted in South Africa.



Amo Mouton of Ouwerf Boerdery and one of the directors of Quattro Citrus tells FreshPlaza that citrus trees have a longer lifespan in the sandy soils of Citrusdal, often reaching 60 years or older, than elsewhere in the country, where there are heavier soils. They grow slower, but aren't affected by root rot diseases. "We are aiming to reach a ratio of soft citrus to hard citrus of about 60:40 to mirror consumer tastes. Soft citrus has a looser growth habit than hard citrus and a cultivar like the Orri mandarin, which is one of the sweetest varieties, is very labour-intensive. It has a strong tendency to vegetative growth so we have to constantly bend the branches to a more horizontal level to stimulate fruiting."

Citrusdal citrus growers have also managed to keep false codling moth (FCM) under tight control. "The breakthrough came with orchard sanitation, when all growers agreed to continuously pick up fallen and infested fruit and bury them at least 60cm deep," according to Mouton. He also firmly believes in the effectiveness of mating disruption, when male moths are confused by flooding the atmosphere with the pheromone released by the female moth. These days spraying programmes against FCM are employed as a last resort.



Water resources in the valley are limited – the Olifants River is barely visible – and growers have to use every strategy available to conserve water. For this reason, Ouwerf's orchards are 'dirty': plant cover is left between rows to conserve soil moisture and improve soil carbon content, even if the downside is a possible increase in fungal populations.

One problem growers in Citrusdal are seeing this season, is the splitting of fruit, especially on Cara Cara navels. The reason for this is unclear, whether related to day-night temperature fluctuations, extreme heat or water stress.

A number of citrus growers in Citrusdal have started enclosing their orchards under netting, not so much against hail damage as in the north of the country, but against sun damage and wind. It is a very expensive exercise, about R200 000 (€14 800) per hectare and there is currently a waiting list for netting. It has the significant advantage of water conservation of up to 20% and if netting could be coupled with irrigation at periods of no evaporation through wind or sunshine, substantial gains could be made.

Another strategy is to re-use established rootstocks, to provide young cuttings with mature root systems, and new growth is very vigorous. White PVA paint protects the suddenly-exposed stem.

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