

Early bloom on Limpopo citrus and stonefruit farm

Bufland is a very diversified farming enterprise in a fertile valley between the Waterberg mountains in Limpopo Province. Citrus and stonefruit production form part of Bufland's activities; currently, the packing of lemons is over and the focus is on navel oranges, to be followed by Valencias next month. The enterprise also includes stud farming, grain and vegetable production.



Recently Bufland made a change to its citrus sorting equipment. They now use a Reemoon two lane optic sizer sorting machine for their class 1 and 2 fruit, while class 3 still go to their manual sizing sorting table. Dewald Eksteen, Bufland director responsible for citrus production, is very pleased with the improvements made by their new sorting lines. "There are 30 outlets for fruit, where before we were physically limited by the rope-and-roller machine for space at the outlets. Now, if we peak at a certain count, I can put more packers at those points. Before, the peak count fruit would heap up at certain points. Now packers can move between the tables and there's more space for cartons."

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The impact even goes back to the orchard, where fruit can now be picked during the optimal window, because there are no longer capacity constraints. Fruit are packed faster, between 60 and 80t daily, which is about one and a half time quicker than before and it has even lifted the morale of workers, says Dewald Eksteen.



Pieter Smit from Reemoon with Dewald Eksteen of Bufland Boerdery

Before there were five to seven workers at the grading table, but the optic sizer has made human graders redundant (although no-one lost their job: they are now packers) and improved accuracy as well as consistency and therefore pack-out.

Bufland packs for Unichoice. "There was a very good lemon harvest of about 800t, but prices were a bit under pressure. We're finished with the early navels, and we didn't see the usual price slump in June when navels from the Cape come onto the market. We received interest from far and wide for our navels – I wish we had more," says Dewald Eksteen.

On the day of *FreshPlaza's* visit, Cara cara navels were being packed for Canada (where consumers really like the variety), Russia, the Middle East and the European Union, as well as for local markets.

Citrus obtains a good natural colouration in this area and Bufland employs no degreening. The orange colour they get on their navels stands them in good stead in the Far East.

Bufland is in the summer rainfall area of South Africa and has citrus black spot, but management has sharpened to such an extent over the past decade through orchard inspections and spraying programmes, that it is now a manageable chronic condition.

It is known which blocks on the farm are less prone to CBS, for instance fruit on younger trees and fruit from within the centre of blocks.

The farm expects approximately 3,000t of navels this season and 1,000t of Valencias.

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Stonefruit production on Bufland

Stonefruit production is somewhat less common in Limpopo Province than citrus and Bufland is at the forefront of the varietal development of low chilling requirement nectarines and peaches. This is becoming increasingly important as the traditional stonefruit and pome fruit production areas in South Africa are documenting fewer chilling units than before, but there is still a vast difference between the Boland and the Bushveld: Ceres in the Koue Bokkeveld accumulates an average of 1,500 to 1,600 chilling units in winter while the Bushveld area of Limpopo Province, a large and varied region, gets between a mere 200 to 600 Infruitec chilling units in winter.

At the recent Hortgro technical symposium held in Simondium, higher temperatures and less winter chilling were put forward as some of the challenges ahead for the South African pome and stonefruit industries.

At Bufland there are 94ha under stonefruit, equally divided between nectarines and peaches, of which about 10ha are new plantings. There are trial blocks for the 35 to 40 nectarine and peach selections for phase 2 evaluation by the Agricultural Research Council's Infruitec/Nietvoorbij facility. Promising selections identified during this phase are then planted on in blocks of a thousand trees each for phase 3 trials on the farm (in parallel with similar phase 3 blocks in the Western Cape).

Bufland's commercial stonefruit orchards comprise some of the most successful low and medium chilling requirement varieties developed by Infruitec/Nietvoorbij, like Honey Blush, Temptation, Bonnigold, Transvalia and Earligold.





Low chill nectarine variety already in bloom during mid-winter

The downside to some of these low chill varieties is that their chilling requirements are so easily met, that winter in the Southern Hemisphere is only halfway through and some orchards are already in full bloom. On these blocks there is now no turning back, so the farm is giving these trees the usual treatment during blooming, but a further cold snap could be detrimental to the harvest.

Among certain medium and low chilling requirement varieties there is the risk of delayed foliation, with the further result that there is a long interval between ripening among the fruit on the tree. The stonefruit blossom period in the Bushveld tends to be longer than in the Cape, especially when fruit trees are as fast out of the starting blocks as some of these low to medium chill varieties.

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