

South African soft citrus gets underway with Satsumas

Across South Africa the early-maturing Miho wase Satsuma is being harvested in a season generally a week or two behind schedule, but otherwise it's an uneventful start to the soft citrus season.

In the north of the country there were some fears of puffy fruit after last week's heavy rain, but it doesn't appear to have had a major impact, apart from a slight drop in sugars. In the Senwes region producers report a better packout percentage than last year because of less wind damage.



In the Nelspruit area a hail storm at the end of December did a lot of damage, but it will be more evident on Nadorcotts and other mandarin varieties (some producers expect an 80% reduction in some Nelspruit orchards). There are also reports of hail damage in Burgersfort, where the season got off to a slow start, but some producers are already more than halfway through.

In the Gamtoos Valley (Patensie) the first Satsumas were harvested about three weeks ago, a harvest that is looking good and has set everyone's minds at ease in an area functioning on a shoe-string water budget.

"The size of the fruit looks equivalent to the size of last year and at Patensie Citrus we expect to have enough water to take us through to the end of the season," says Madeleine Ludwig, technical manager of Patensie Citrus. "However, the drought has an impact on all of us in the wider Gamtoos Valley and we're using water as sparingly as possible. Producers in this area are applying a wide range of strategies to mitigate the drought, like mulch under trees and prioritising high-value orchards and sinking boreholes, where possible."

There are producers in this area that have had to cut irrigation by as much as 50% and who haven't been able to plant cash crops, like pumpkin or cabbage, this season. There is widespread use of ultra low flow drip irrigation, even blocking up some of the drippers between trees in one or two-year old orchards where root development is still limited, resulting in a water use reduction of two-thirds.

She adds that they haven't seen citrus black spot in the Gamtoos Valley for a long time and now, in their fourth year of using the sterile insect technique Xsit as well as the FMS FCM monitoring service, they are completely in control of the false codling moth (FCM) population.

In Patensie, the Owari Satsuma will start in about two weeks, followed by the late Kuno two weeks after that.

In the Western Cape, Satsumas are coming in from the Swellendam area and here and there in Citrusdal. In the latter area, Piet Smit, marketing director of Favourite Fresh Export, reports very good colour and high sugar because of a stretch of sunny days.

By the end of week 12, 57,000 x 15kg cartons of Satsumas had been shipped from South Africa, just a fraction of the 1,862,735 cartons expected of the season (7% up from last year). They go mostly to the UK and Russia, not much to the EU as yet, but figures could look quite different a week from now.

Some South African exporters have removed Satsumas from their portfolio, partly because of limited marketing options for the fruit, partly because Southern Hemisphere Satsumas come under pressure from Northern Hemisphere late mandarins and partly also because the Satsuma has a tendency to become puffy when receiving a lot of rain close to harvest, rendering the fruit unmarketable.



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