

Persistence pays off for award-winning citrus farmer

By Mike Burgess March 31, 2019 at 10:27 am

Noluthando Mbilase, who farms near Fort Beaufort, recently won the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries' Top Entrepreneur Export Markets title in its annual Female Entrepreneur Awards. The award is testimony to her determination, as well as her willingness to learn, since starting in the citrus industry as a field officer many years ago.



Mbilase and her son, Ahlumine, on the farm with some of the trophies and prizes she has won this year. 'There are no jobs these days,' she says. 'The better way to live is to have your own business.' Photo: Mike Burgess

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Noluthando Mbilase (55) has taken many years to attain recognition for her citrus farming venture, but this has made her achievement even more remarkable, and victory taste even sweeter.

Mbilase has won R420 000 in prize money this year in regional, provincial and national competitions run by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

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And, in her typically disciplined way, she intends using her windfall to continue developing her farm.

Mbilase produces export citrus (oranges, lemons and soft citrus) on 17,5ha of her 62ha farm, Greenwood, in the upper Kat River Valley near Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape.



Young citrus trees on Noluthando Mbilase's Greenwood farm near Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape.

She has another 15,5ha due to come into production in the near future, and will use her prize money to establish another 10ha of orchards. This will bring the total area under citrus to 43ha.

Humble beginnings

Greenwood may not represent a very large citrus production unit, but it symbolises an immense achievement for Mbilase, who was born in a communal area near King William's Town.

Her mother, Nonyameko, worked as a domestic helper in the town while her father, Bovana, was a migrant labourer in Cape Town.

Despite working in King William's Town, Nonyameko managed to run several projects in the communal area to make extra money; these included producing and selling vegetables and soap, as well as farming chickens and cattle.

Attending to agricultural chores before school, and her siblings after school, became a way of life for Mbilase.

"Every day I'd wake up and milk the cows and irrigate the garden," she recalls. "When I came back from school, I'd have to cook and look after my sister and brother."

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Mbilase enrolled for a citrus production course at the Fort Cox Agricultural College near Keiskammahoek in 1989, followed by a practical component at the Thyume Citrus Estate.

She was then appointed as a field officer in the Kat River Valley by Ulimocor, the then Ciskei State Agricultural Corporation. In 1996 Ulimocor was in the process of being liquidated and Mbilase was appointed to

Greenwood in the upper Kat River Valley in an attempt to turn around faltering production.

The start of her new job proved to be a baptism of fire. Even before she had received an appointment letter from the state, she became involved in serious conflict with the previous manager's workers, who vandalised infrastructure on the farm and on one occasion even slashed her vehicle's tyres.

Showing great courage, Mbilase held her nerve, and before long the conflict petered out. She then began consolidating her position on the property.

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Hardly had Mbilase got going, however, than she suffered another setback: the Ciskei Agricultural Bank was restructured, leaving her with limited production funding.

Refusing to give up, she found alternative sources of income to fund operations and pay staff. For many years, she ran a spaza shop near King William's Town through which she sold cabbage and butternut produced on about 0,5ha on Greenwood.

At one stage, she also ran a nursery in nearby Alice that grew pine and eucalyptus seedlings for the forestry industry.

Sixteen long years later, in 2013, Mbilase's fortunes changed when she received R4,5 million recapitalisation funding from the state. This enabled her to repay debt and buy machinery such as a tractor to develop new orchards.

A state production grant of R230 000 a year for five years also went a long way towards boosting production.

In earlier years, Mbilase had packed her fruit at a number of packhouses, with varying degrees of success. For the past eight years, however, she has used the Eden Agri Packhouse established in 2010 in the Kat River Valley by former Capespan employee and citrus farmer Shaun Brown.

The packhouse, now partly owned by five black citrus farmers, is conveniently situated, and Brown's transparency has been exemplary.

"Shaun shows us everything, the statements ... everything," says Mbilase. "His marketing is good and he understands the business."

Challenges and cash flow

Devastating hailstorms have tested Mbilase severely over the years. In 1999, and again in 2003, hail destroyed half her citrus crop, and in 2008 it wiped it out entirely.

Managing disease and pests, particularly citrus black spot and false codling moth, has also proved challenging.

"We follow the spraying programme from Sundays River Citrus Company to the book," she says.

Another problem has been leaks in ageing pipelines in her irrigation system; she has not had the resources to replace them.

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Mbilase's irrigation pumps are powered by three Eskom power points, making electricity her main input cost, followed by diesel and chemicals.

"Don't talk about my electricity bill. It's terrible," she says. "I never pay less than R10 000 a month per point."

Theft of citrus, and to a lesser degree, livestock, has also been a challenge. "Maybe thieves target me because I'm a woman," she says. "With citrus it's controllable with good security, but it's still a cost."

Diversification

With Greenwood's significant input costs, cash flow has always been difficult, and Mbilase has therefore focused on generating alternative income streams.

In 1999 she launched a small beef operation that today consists of 32 head of Bonsmara-type cows. In 2010 she bought 10 in-lamb Boer goat ewes and a ram to build a flock of goats that now numbers 120 breeding ewes. Livestock is run on Greenwood as well as surrounding communal land.

Over the years, Mbilase's entrepreneurial spirit has not been confined to Greenwood, as her one-time spaza shop and seedling nursery, which she wants to revive, illustrates. She says challenges are there to be overcome through disciplined, proactive intervention.

"You must deal with humps in life because they can cause you to leave the farm," she says.

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