



BEN VORSTER is the Chairman of the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa and represents growers within South Africa's biggest fruit industry. He is also a director and owner at Laeveld Sitrus (Pty) Ltd., a considerable citrus production farming operations with its headquarters at Letsitele near Tzaneen in Limpopo.

When you google Ben Vorster the first thing that comes up is a high school in Tzaneen that was named after his grandfather Ben Vorster, one of the citrus farming pioneers in the Letsitele area. The Vorster family has lived and expanded their farming operations in this part of Limpopo for generations and today they remain an integral part of the Limpopo Province's citrus industry, one of the major economic drivers in the region. The South African Fruit Journal caught up with him and asked him the following questions.

Louise Brodie reports

Although your family has been involved in the citrus industry, what made you choose to become involved in the industry as well?

"Ever since I was a little boy I knew that I wanted to be a farmer. Growing up on a farm and being a typical farm boy I never wanted to be anything else. My father and grandfather were my biggest inspirations and I knew that I wanted to be like them - I wanted to become a citrus farmer.

"I was very fortunate to learn a lot about the citrus industry from a young age. My parents gave me the opportunity to make my own decision on what I wanted to become. That was the easiest decision I ever had to make and here I am today proud to be part of our massive industry.

"For me, involvement in the citrus industry started at an early age by driving tractors every day as this was a big love of mine. I also later learned how to spray the trees and drove around at night monitoring the irrigation which at that time was still flood irrigation. In this way I learned about every aspect of the whole production cycle, from flowering through to packing. Every year is different, each year with its own set of challenges, you learn at the mercy of nature, you need to adapt and make new plans and that is what makes me tick."

How and why did you become involved with the producer representative side of organised agriculture and what has this experience meant for you?

"After studying Agricultural Engineering, I came back to the farm. At the time there were only a few young farmers in the area and as in most careers we started right at the bottom. At meetings and study groups I was the secretary, taking minutes and helping with the organising and this was how I became involved with organised agriculture. After deregulation in 1997, the industry went through rapid changes and farmers learned a great deal in a short period. It became clear that we needed an organisation to represent grower interests and that was when "Citrus SA" was formed.

"Edward Vorster was the chairman of Citrus SA and at that time I was also part of the organisation. A couple of years later I took over from him, representing growers in the Letsitele area. I soon realised how important organised agriculture is for

our industry and gained considerable experience regarding the industry and the marketing of fruit to international markets.

"I was very fortunate to start farming during the single channel market days. The experience of being part of the organised agriculture during the deregulation period was invaluable as it showed us what worked well and also showed us what didn't work. This left me with a clear view on how important organised agriculture is to the success of producers and other stakeholders within the industry."

What do you consider to be the important areas of focus for the industry going forward?

"With a huge dynamic industry like the citrus industry, there will always be risks which we need to take note of:

- Market development is a key factor to the growing volume of the different varieties, some more than others, exported from South Africa
- Phytosanitary pests and barriers into the EU need to be sorted out as we have been fighting against these barriers with some pests for the last 26 years. Times have changed and with a lot of new challenges we cannot let old issues stand in the way of future growth.
- Relations between the producers and the government need to improve as we are all working towards the same goal.
- We as an industry need to do more towards our grower development by helping more black farmers to become successful in their farming operations and become bona fide commercial farmers."

What is your outlook on the future prospects of the South African Citrus industry?

"The citrus industry has experienced ups and downs in the past and we are currently facing numerous challenges with regard to rising costs and less favourable exchange rates. The new challenge of expropriation without compensation is probably our biggest current challenge. However, with CGA and its strong team of personnel and board leading our industry, the good quality of fruit produced in South Africa and the international strength of our huge industry, these strengths will assist our industry to grow into the future."