



CITRUS TREE PLANTING

Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige Museum en Navorsingsentrum

This is a sequel to “Historic citrus tree planting at the old Raadsaal in Bloemfontein”, published in the *SA Fruit Journal* June/July 2014 edition, in memory of the late Dr Hennie le Roux. By Tanya Ungerer (adapted from Amanda Groenewald’s article on LitNet)



When history tells you that Bloemfontein is not known for its orange trees, you can’t help but stand in awe of the five orange trees that were planted between 1907 - 1909, still bearing fruit 100 years later. After the restoration of the old government building that was destroyed by a fire in the early 1900s, these five trees were planted in the courtyard where they were protected from the elements. For almost a century these trees produced healthy fruit and grew to almost 8 m high.

During the renovation of the Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige Museum en Navorsingsentrum (NALN) in 2002 some of these trees started showing signs of ill-health. Eventually, one died and by 2007/08 two more

were removed. The late Mr Otto Liebenberg, curator of NALN at the time, contacted the Citrus Growers’ Association (CGA) out of concern for the survival of the last two trees. They put him in touch with the late Dr Hennie le Roux, the Extension Manager at Citrus Research International (CRI) at the time, who immediately arranged for an inspection of the trees. After determining that the trees had Phytophthora collar rot and could not be saved, he took buds from the original Valencia trees and Dr Fanie van Vuuren budded them onto Swingle citrumelo rootstocks, which are more tolerant of soil-borne diseases. These trees were then grown in a greenhouse to a suitable size for replanting.

On 21 February 2014 six of the young orange trees were removed from the greenhouses at CRI in Nelspruit, under a permit from DALRRD (Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development) – formerly DAFF (Department

of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries) – and transported to Bloemfontein under the watchful eye of Hennie himself. During the 160th commemoration of the Republic of the Orange Free State, which took place on 22 February 2014, two of these trees were planted – one in the south-easterly corner and the other in the north-westerly corner of the courtyard. The late Dr Hennie le Roux and Ms Gloria Weare attended this ceremony as guests of honour and as representatives of the CRI and the CGA.

The remaining four trees were kept in pots in the courtyard and as a result of Amanda Groenewald’s efforts to raise funds through “Vriende van NALN” (to ensure regular application of compost and fertiliser), the trees are now flourishing and yielding many boxes of beautiful oranges that are distributed to charity organisations.

When winter arrives, Annelien Diedericks (Museum Human Scientist at NALN) reads

Uys Krige’s poem, “Lied van die lemoen” to visitors at NALN. It’s almost as if Krige wrote this poem especially for the orange trees at NALN. Below is an extract from his poem (Brink, André P (samest), *Groot Verseboek* 2000, Kaapstad, Tafelberg, 2000):

“Wat het die mens met jou gemaak, lemoen?
Vir my gesorg, oor my gewaak.
Nou’s ek dié seën op sy strewe,
simbool van vrugbaarheid en lewe!
Wat moet ons met jou doen, lemoen?”
Ek wil ‘n goue glans wees tussen groen,
gepluk word dan, só met my lot versoen,
lemoen wees slegs, lemoen, lemoen, lemoen!”

Visitors are allowed to pick some of the fruit from the trees and to many of them, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

The story of the orange trees in the courtyard of NALN does not end there. Eventually, the last two old orange trees also died due to the Phytophthora collar rot and had to be removed. As the trees were older than 60 years, a special permit had to be obtained from the South African Heritage Resources Agency

The legacy of the contribution of Dr Hennie le Roux and Otto Liebenberg to the preservation of the history of the old government building, will be remembered by every visitor to NALN, and for future generations.

(SAHRA) before the trees could be cut down to the ground on 5 June 2020. The remaining root system was removed on 27 October 2021, together with the infected soil. And the hole was filled with fresh, healthy soil – ready for new trees to be planted.

On 11 November 2021 two of the young trees were removed from their pots and planted in the place of the old trees – one in the north-easterly corner and the other in the south-westerly corner, in order to preserve the historic character of the courtyard. The remaining two trees will be transferred to bigger pots and placed back in the courtyard.

A special celebration to commemorate the preservation of this piece of history, was arranged for 29 November 2021. Mariana le Roux, widow of the late Dr Hennie le Roux, attended this celebration and had the honour of cutting the ribbon during the ceremony, in memory of her husband.

Although many people played a part in

the preservation of these citrus trees, the contribution of two people stands out above the rest: Otto Liebenberg who made the phone call to the CGA, looking for help and Dr Hennie le Roux who went above and beyond to ensure that the young trees were grafted from the genetics of the old trees and taken through to NALN for planting.

The first two trees were planted in 2014. Sadly, they were never seen again by Hennie le Roux, as he passed away on 4 October 2016, less than two weeks after Otto Liebenberg, who passed away on 24 September of that year. With orange trees a living monument for them both, the legacy of their contribution to the preservation of the history of the old government building will be remembered by every visitor to NALN, and for future generations. ▮

Hesti Botha, daughter of Mariana le Roux and the late Dr Hennie le Roux, was appointed by the CGA on 1 February.