Planting at all in these tough conditions?

In my article featured in the *SA Fruit Journal Jun/Jul'22*, I wrote about a meeting where I was introduced by the chairman as the speaker who "will advise us now of what cultivars not to plant". By Jon Roberts

Since the said grower meeting, factors like the continuing slow market for many cultivars further disrupted by the Russia-Ukraine War, floods in Durban, exorbitant shipping costs, disrupted logistics, and production cost inflation, growers are concentrating on the most important aspects of survival as their primary concern. New planting developments are on the backburner and the consensus at growers' meetings that I have attended is, "not planting unless critically necessary". In times like these, my opinions in the previous article becomes starkly relevant and I will propose some more.

Now, there is no room for further expansion, let alone planting unevaluated, "higher-risk" new cultivars. The trees in the ground that have not come into bearing will already take up any space there may be left in the market. But at time of writing, apparently the market was sluggish, freight costs restrictively high, and rotation of cool room space and container availability slow.

Jon Roberts

So, what do we mean by not planting "unless critically necessary". It's when cultivars have diminishing market demand, for example the last two years the market for satsumas has been extremely difficult with many growers facing a "pay in" situation, based on the previous year's performance. So, does one continue and remain optimistic as farmers do, or discontinue? Based on the critical costs of inputs and shipping, the argument would be that this is hardly a time for "passengers": remove unprofitable crops and replant or apply top working. Anyway, the variety will take several years to come into bearing, operating costs will be lower and growers will likely have something to offer when the economy improves. And as we know, it always does. But what is the best replacement?

The good years provided optimism, that translated into a willingness to bear more risk in many cases. And in the current situation risk has all but vanished, as the old flagship cultivars come back into focus, and in many cases no planting is taking place at all for now.

The conservative approach of planting the tried and tested cultivars is fine, but only as long as there is still demand for them in the market. Speaking to growers in the Cape, the stone fruit industry, (apricots were mentioned), have had hard seasons of late. Evidently, partly because they have not kept up with their competitor southern hemisphere industries in terms of offering the new cultivars the market wants. So, although planting a proven cultivar in optimum conditions is sound, what does the market demand dictate?

In the Valencia industry, the older cultivars have remained popular, but, with increasing production and logistics costs, cartons/hectare is critical. It is likely that the Valencia flagships will remain popular. However, even in these tough times, for fear of falling behind, it is advisable to continue evaluating selections of the flagships that offer improved production/quality characteristics or that ripen in windows where there is a shortage of supply. "Horses for courses": naturally, planting cultivars in the climates where they thrive will be critical too; sub-optimal production and fruit size, as well as inflationary costs will be difficult in these markets .

Likewise, planting navel oranges and lemons in optimal areas where production and size can be achieved, is critical. But here too, we are starting to see improved selections of the flagships that must be evaluated or even replace a "passenger" variety.

The grapefruit industry has not had many exciting new cultivars on offer. But there are some coming through and hopefully, when the economy improves, there will be some ideas to explore. In the meantime, the flagships continue to dominate in a fairly flat market. Growers have been very aware of supply and demand factors in this flat market. Within seasonal constraints, supply has been responsibly managed – relatively speaking – and only replacement plantings have been done. This is an approach approach worth considering for other citrus types.

The Mandarin industry is a lot more dynamic, there are windows that have been heavily planted, but there are also early windows where reasonable demand still exists. There are many more new cultivars on offer for Mandarins than for other citrus types, and it is difficult to sort the wood from the trees. Only time will tell if there is a potential winner amongst these.

In these difficult times, if you are removing a "passenger", or wanting to reduce plantings in congested windows, it is advisable to consider a tried-and-tested cultivar that performs optimally for your climatic area, with the proviso that there is still a market for it. If there are already tested, improved selections of a flagship, such as improved production, and there is still sufficient demand in the market, this is probably the better option than to continue battling with a "passenger". If the window for the flagship is full then one needs to consider the most proven new variety that falls in an earlier or later window. It is important to continue to follow, or plant trials of the new cultivars in preparation for when the economy improves.

> Newly-planted varieties will take several years to come into bearing, operating costs will be lower and growers will likely have something to offer when the economy improves.

The Citrus Growers' Association Cultivar Company (CGACC) has focussed on procuring flagship cultivars with improved characteristics, as well as procuring cultivars with the flagship parentage.

There are varieties such as the new Early Clementine range that fall in the satsuma time and have undergone reasonable evaluation in Spain and SA. Our Clemensoon ripens at the same time as satsumas, and has been planted commercially in Spain and looks good in trials in SA. Other management companies have also brought in an early range. And we have several early seedless Mandarins in evaluation coming through quarantine shortly that are seedless and ripen before Nova.

The CGACC has three selections of navels that, under evaluation, have proven to be improvements on Newhall and Lina in terms of ripening and colouring earlier and more evenly, with better size. We have a navel variety that has a completely closed navel end, reducing split, Alternaria rot, FCM damage and other imperfections, but consistently produces more cartons/ha.

We have a Valencia ripening three weeks earlier than Turkey with superior external and internal colour and equivalent production. And we are evaluating three seedless Valencias ripening before Midknight, as well as a Midknight that consistently bears more than its parent in hot/dry climates.

The UF 914, a sweeter and safer Star Ruby hybrid, is at the foundation block where budwood is being multiplied for release this coming summer.

We have a similar evaluation of a Eureka selection from the Sunday's River for heavier production and longer fruit.

In summary, none of this is rocket science and while reading this you may think all of it is pretty obvious. But during difficult times one needs to take a rain check on the unknown, and look for the more obvious varieties that we know will work.