NO ROOM FOR PASSENGER CULTIVARS

As we all know, the current conditions in the South African citrus industry are extremely challenging. By Jon Roberts

Currently, there is very little appetite for new development in the citrus industry of SA. And tough market conditions have also exposed certain cultivars that have limited demand in the market or are not performing in terms of production or postharvest requirements. These "passenger" cultivars may have hidden behind overall profitability during better days, but current hardships necessitate a rethink. They are as expensive as gaps in orchards and must therefore be identified promptly, and either discontinued, or changed to a cultivar that pays its way.

The prevailing financial challenges in the citrus industry can be significantly mitigated by changes like improved logistics in our ports through better governance; better freight pricing, as the supply and movement of shipping and containers improve globally after COVID-19; an end to the war in Ukraine, resulting in better fuel, energy and fertiliser prices; and improved marketing conditions through effective trade negotiations with the EU.

Overplanting is another economic concern for the industry. The South African citrus industry estimates that there are another 100 million cartons of fruit coming into production by 2030. This is estimated from trees that have been planted but have not yet come into bearing, setting the potential for oversupply in motion. Unlike before, when certain corrections would bring about improvements in the market within a season, plantings of this scale will take more time to correct.

However, there are opportunities that can be exploited now, like diversifying away from oversupplied cultivars. When conditions improve, "passengers" will reduce profit margins, as their market will remain difficult and oversupplied, for example, lemons. In fact, I have been in discussion with many farmers who have realised this and want to diversify away from a variety that will most likely be oversupplied for some time.

If growers take action now, they have a better chance of top-working a young tree, without the loss of production that they would experience top-working an older tree in production. This may also apply to trees that are still in the nursery – potential "passengers", in which case the grower's nursery should top-work them before planting.

And if they are recently planted, they can probably be budded in the green scaffold branches, see green circled area in **Image 1** with green branches, early in the growing season. These branches will take a normal T-bud, shown in **Image 2**.

If they are two to four years old, then they can still be chipped (**Image 3**) or patch-grafted (**Image 4**). Budding these young trees will be the quickest and most cost-effective turnaround to producing a paying cultivar that is lower-risk or less oversupplied.

If trees are older than four years, growers will have to top-work using the more conventional methods, such as budding shoots or bark grafting. Changing your "passenger" tree now, and managing a non-producing, growing tree is cheaper than carrying a full-grown "passenger" variety at full production cost.

Be sure

- the rootstock is young, healthy and disease-free.
- the rootstock is compatible with the cultivar that is to be top-worked.
- to use a nurseryman or top-working company, which is generally the best option.

The hard part is deciding what to replace your "passengers" with:

In times like these, there is less room for risk. So, be sure the cultivar is evaluated in your area, or in areas similar to yours and is proven for production quality and postharvest. Next, be sure there is market acceptance and demand for the variety.

It's difficult to find a cultivar in this sweet spot that satisfies low-level risk through proper evaluation, and has sufficient demand in the market.

- If growers lean towards planting "proven" varieties with less risk, they risk planting an oversupplied cultivar.
- On the other hand, if growers take on more risk by planting an "unproven" variety, they may become exposed to possible production, quality or postharvest crop failure.
- Probably most importantly, don't plant varieties that are marginal in that particular area. CIS evaluators can assist with cultivars that are recommended for each area.

In the soft citrus sector for example, the early part of the season, before Clementine and Nova, is probably the only remaining window with reasonable demand at present. Oronules Clementine is a case in point; it's close to the sweet spot in the early Mandarin window. A good early Clementine that has been evaluated for a while, initially showed alternate bearing. But in Spain, it has proven to give better production and better fruit size using an interstock. It is in the early part of the Clementine season that it's not yet oversupplied.

And there are other varieties, even earlier than Oronules. Clemenson, the earliest Clementine (the same time as Satsuma, but superior) is less "proven", and evaluation has only just started in SA. But it has been evaluated for some time in Spanish soft citrus growing areas, which are similar in climate to some of our soft citrus areas. So, there is more risk of less evaluation, but Spanish evaluation results may be applicable to a certain extent. This ultra-early Clementine variety is higher quality than the current early-season Satsuma.

The Citrus Growers' Association Cultivar Company (CGACC) and other cultivar companies, have many new varieties in different stages of evaluation in the early window. But very few of them have been sufficiently evaluated and commercially proven at this stage. If one becomes proven as commercially acceptable, the early season is still an opportunity for growers.

Here are some of the other citrus types that could help growers diversify

- Red pigmented varieties may be an option to diversify from the traditional orange navels and Valencias. The Red Lina Navel and Rosalate Navel (Valentine), gives an option on either side of the CaraCara Navel. There are red pigmented Valencias too.
- The Kas early Valencia (three weeks earlier than Turkey) has over four years of evaluation displaying superior internal quality, higher production, and has darker external and internal colour than Turkey. The evaluation is at an early stage; so again, one needs to weigh up risk vs. opportunity/demand. We have several seedless options, earlier than Delta and Midknight (and later).
- For several years, the Star Ruby Grapefruit has been under pressure due to declining demand. Florida 914, a sweet red grapefruit hybrid that is also medication-safe, may reverse the flattening grapefruit demand trend. Again, it requires evaluation in South African conditions, and to be tested in the market.

Weighing up the risk vs. opportunity remains an important factor. One could add to this, the answer must surely be to – as soon as possible – diversify away from the massive peaks in the market. But in doing so, one needs to be sure of the risk of under-evaluation vs. oversupply.

We have held several virtual group discussions recently on this topic, and we are available for further discussion.


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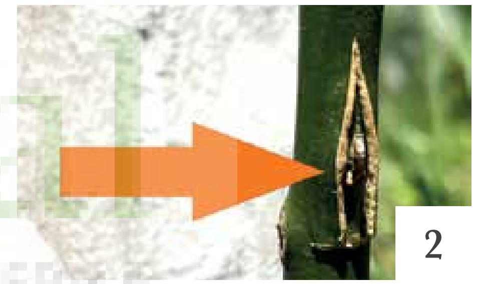
2


3

1: 1 - 2-year old tree 2: Inverted T Bud 3: Chip bud can be used in hardened wood, in a 2 - 3-year old tree (with no green wood) 4: Patch-bud technique on a 3 - 4-year old tree


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