

CULTIVARS

hidden opportunities

Research has shown some older cultivars to – in certain cases – perform as well, if not better than the protected ones. By Jon Roberts

Recent articles have highlighted the need for growers to identify “passenger” orchards, and to replace those that are older and no longer productive, or that produce varieties that are out of favour in the market. This is an important step in addressing the looming oversupply of certain varieties that will come into bearing when the massive plantings of recent years come to fruition.

In its mandate, the top priority of the Citrus Growers' Association Cultivar Company (CGACC) is to act as a mouthpiece on the status of new cultivars towards our shareholders – the CGA grower members. This role is especially important in light of the



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trend of growers planting new varieties that are protected with a royalty, regardless of whether the variety is better-suited for their operations than open cultivars such as Jasi Valencia, or not.

Johan Joubert, lead evaluator of CRI-CIS cultivar development showed the author trials of this cultivar during the late Valencia window. Specifically, the trials demonstrated that this cultivar could potentially be an option for the late Valencia window. Jasi has been observed in small commercial blocks with Johan for several years. It has a number of characteristics that stood out, namely a good production, good size, peaking between 64 – 56, low seed, and relatively smooth skin for a Valencia. These characteristics have remained consistent year after year, which is why Jasi is of particular interest. Additionally, the cultivar is open, meaning it is not protected or subject to any royalty. But of particular interest, was the fact that it was performing as well as, if not better, than other commercial blocks of similar age in the same region.

Over this period, it was interesting to note that very little budwood of this particular cultivar was supplied in comparison to the protected cultivars. Even when considering cultivars with similar characteristics, this particular one went unnoticed. It was clear that the probable cause of this was the promotion of the protected cultivars by their breeders and cultivar companies. The open Jasi cultivar remained relatively obscure. This was hardly due to a lack of information, but rather because the cultivar – having

had no commercial benefit to cultivar companies – was not actively promoted to growers. The CRI evaluators, under the leadership of Johan Joubert, continuously evaluate new cultivars objectively. However, they are not tasked with the promotion of cultivars. The results of these evaluations are presented at CRI symposia and workshops, and published on the CRI website. Though, many people may choose to carry out their own evaluations of cultivars. But it is not always easy to gain access to protected cultivars, unless they are prepared to plant significant commercial amounts. Over time, the characteristics of these cultivars have become more widely known, and they have become more popular and are being planted increasingly.

Though there are not many new “open” cultivars coming through evaluation, research has shown that there are still some of these cultivars that can perform just as well as, if not better than, the protected ones.

Oronules Clementine is one of these cultivars that were evaluated in the early 1990s. It had an early maturity, showing good external colour and good internal quality. But it was an alternate bearer, meaning it had lower returns per hectare than the Satsuma mandarins that were ripening at the same time. Therefore, Oronules Clementine was eventually discarded. Though, over the years and through trial and error, it was discovered that top-working, using a sweet orange interstock, was a successful method of obtaining good size and production without alternate bearing.

The Satsuma market has been flatlining for some time and is only in demand in certain markets. This suggests that the current supply of Satsumas is likely at its limit, due to the plantings that are already in the ground. Planting Oronules Clementine using an interstock, presents an alternative to growers wanting to replace or reduce their Satsumas. Likewise, the late Mandarin boom has caused a large supply peak in the late easy peeler maturity window, with many



young trees still to come into bearing. Top-working some of these onto an interstock is an option to spread one's easy peelers to an earlier window.

The mid-season easy peeler window is indeed well supplied with Nova and Nules Clementine. Though, there are still a few good options available for early-season easy peelers. From the author's observations of

commercial clementine orchards, it is clear that the current protected “early” Clementine cultivars are not superior to Oronules.

The author is of the opinion that Oronules is better in terms of mid-earliness, external quality, and internal quality. Not only is it as good as other cultivars in terms of production, but it also requires little management in terms of fruit thinning for

Left: Jasi Valencia
Left below: Oronules Clementine

size. Looking at budwood supplied, the question of why growers plant more of the protected cultivars if they are not necessarily better is once again raised. That said, breeders and cultivar companies cannot be faulted for promoting their own cultivars or withholding information. The return of Oronules as a high-potential cultivar is relatively new, with information of the use of an interstock only recently becoming available. Growers in Clementine areas can benefit from this knowledge by top-working certain trees as a trial, specifically on sweet orange interstock.

When it comes to avoiding the potential to miss out on high-potential cultivars, it is critical to engage with the CRI evaluators to access their objective information. Independent consultants play an important role as well. In terms of value, this is an even bigger decision than buying a car. Therefore, it is important to “shop around” and to thoroughly evaluate options. At a recent symposium, Paul Cronjé jokingly referred to the author and some other cultivar management agents as cultivar “smouse” (“hawkers” in English). While this reference was meant as a joke, it is important not to put all of your bets on one “smous”, but rather, to consider all of your options.

In previous articles, the importance of the use of some kind of score sheet was discussed, and it is once again encouraged. The CGACC has created a score sheet while strategising with Flippie Viljoen, which can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/3Y315v9>. Growers are welcome to contact the CGACC for assistance. 



QR link
for the
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score sheet