

Emerging citrus growers LOOKING BACK 21 YEARS

Twenty-one years ago very few black citrus growers had been exposed to the techniques of growing citrus. By **Princess Moloka Mogale**



One of the major reasons why many black citrus growers changed course along the way, was a lack of dedicated support. But the late Israel Nemoarani from Easy Farm in Limpopo changed this narrative.

Easy Farm was established in 1991, with a focus on vegetables. In 1996 they started to transition to citrus. Currently, the farm comprises of 60% citrus, mangoes and bananas.

The total citrus hectareage on the farm is 124 ha, made up of Navels and Valencias, with over 60% of the citrus trees at peak production stage. This makes for an impressive age distribution of the trees.

The farm employs 140 seasonal workers during the harvesting and packing period: pickers, packers and drivers. During off-peak season the farm employs 35 permanent employees.

Founder Israel Nemoarani remained involved in the management and running of the day-to-day operations of the farm, until his passing in 2019. He was a member of the Citrus Growers' Association board.

After his passing, his son Lavhengwa Nemoarani stepped into his father's shoes to continue the farm legacy – a reminder of the importance of succession planning, which was successfully implemented when Israel was still alive. Therefore, Lavhengwa was equipped to run the business. The transition wasn't easy, as the employees were used to Israel's management style, and had to adapt. Older employees who had been working on the farm since its inception took time to accept Lavhengwa's leadership. But with perseverance and working towards a common goal, the challenges were overcome.

Israel played an important role in taking the bold step to join the citrus industry with



CGA-GDC General Manager Lukhanyo Nkombisa (left) and Lavhengwa Nemoarani

such vigour. This led to him forming great relationships with stakeholders such as Du Roi, who gave him trees on credit, to be repaid once they started bearing fruit. The cost of establishing and maintaining a citrus orchard ranges between R120 000 and R180 000, based on the region of production. Therefore, Du Roi deserves acknowledgement for his role in forging the success of Easy Farm.

Since its inception in 2016, the Grower Development Company (GDC) has been instrumental in providing information and guidance to developing farmers, through the facilitation and participation in citrus study groups and information days. The services of the GDC later expanded to providing farmers with a grant allowance, towards input costs, which has led to reduced production costs. In the most recent financial years alone, the farm acquired more than R1.2 million worth of inputs. As an independent exporter without a strategic partner, this has been beneficial in helping to retain the farm's ability to export.

Easy Farm started exporting in 2000 and has managed to maintain its export status by complying with the requirements of the likes of GLOBALG.A.P., PPECB and SIZA.

Lavhengwa and his team are currently exploring other varieties, such as soft citrus, and have started engaging relevant stakeholders to be able to access some of these sought-after markets. ▀

CITRUS ACADEMY BURSARY FUND still fostering excellence

From humble beginnings in 2006, the Citrus Academy Bursary Fund has grown into one of the largest in primary agriculture.

By **Jacomien de Klerk**



Over the last 17 years, the Citrus Academy Bursary Fund has helped more than 360 students to realise their ambitions in studying towards the qualifications they needed, to establish and grow careers in the citrus and fruit industries. Just over 1 000 bursaries were awarded during this time, totalling more than R31 million.

Combined with the bursaries allocated by Citrus Research International (CRI), the sister company of the Citrus Academy, no other agricultural industry invests more in fostering and growing talent for the future.

The Citrus Academy Bursary Fund has achieved an almost unheard-of success rate over this time, with a successful completion rate of over 98% for funded courses. Of the almost 300 graduates at the end of 2022, more than a third are still working for companies in the citrus industry, with another third working in academia, for government departments and agencies, and for organisations in the wider fruit industry. This completion and retention rate is exceptional and shows a return on investment that has almost tripled the value of every cent that has been invested by the industry over time.

The purpose of the Citrus Academy Bursary

Fund is not solely to see students through to graduation, but also to help them start long and thriving careers. To this end, the Academy offers students opportunities to gain workplace experience, through vacation work while they are still studying, and through internships and graduate placements afterwards. The Industry Exposure Programme funds students to attend symposia, conferences and other events, helping them to develop a better understanding of their field of study, and to meet experts in their fields of interest.

All of this was enabled by the vision of the Citrus Growers' Association when they established the Citrus Academy at the beginning of 2005, originally as a division within the CGA. Today, the Academy is an independent non-profit company, focusing primarily on industry transformation, but also making an important contribution to the sustainability of all citrus growers.

The Citrus Academy develops learning resources – both written and audio-visual – that are made available for free through its website and YouTube channel, as well as the Citrus Resource Warehouse website. It also develops learning programmes, including short courses, master classes, certification programmes, a work-readiness programme, and even a programme aimed at secondary school learners. These programmes are delivered as contact learning and e-learning.

A true asset to the citrus industry, the Citrus Academy strives to support and enable sustainable growth and inclusive development in the industry, fostering excellence in everything it does. ▀

Students at the Lowveld College of Agriculture (now called the University of Mpumalanga) in 2006 with Desiree Schonken, the Citrus Academy Bursary Fund manager at the time