Time to plant more oranges and build juicing factories?

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1, 2 and 3: The devastating floods in Citrusdal 4: A parched citrus orchard in Citrusdal, before the floods

The role of the weather in SA and other orange-producing countries this season. By Jon Roberts

Jon Roberts

In a recent global overview of the orange market by Clayton Swart, on *Fresh Plaza*, a consistent theme emerged: the negative effects of extreme weather conditions on each orange-producing country. This led the writer to conclude that "weather played a substantial role in South Africa and other orange-producing countries this season".

Starting in early winter in the Eastern Cape, the anomalies of a wet, warm early winter appeared in the usual summer rainfall area of the province. This turned into extremely dry and windy conditions in the late winter.

In early mid-winter, waves of cold fronts hit the Cape. Citrusdal – the drier part of the winter rainfall area – was severely flooded, losing their access road for the second year in a row. Trucks were unable to get to port and orchards remained water-logged for weeks, spoiling fruit for the fresh export market.

Later in the winter, there was extreme frost damage of -8 °C in some areas in the hot, dry northern regions on the tropic of Capricorn. Fruit was frosted and may even have affected the blossom for the next year.

The unexpected effects of this unusual weather

The unusually warm, wet early winter in the Eastern Cape resulted in premature internal juice maturity – by two weeks – with lower acid due to the heavy rain. However, the external quality tended to be two weeks later due to warm weather. Timing the harvesting correctly proved tricky, resulting in many green oranges being sent for juicing. The weather also contributed to added creasing.

And Spanish farmers are caught in the aftermath of the catastrophic October floods that are said to have caused more fatalities than the 1957 floods.

On the flipside, however, the crippling drought in Brazil resulted in a multi-decade record juice futures price in 2024 on the New York Stock Exchange. South African growers could send oranges downgraded from export quality into a lucrative juice market.

"The unusually high price for orange juice provided orange exports with a welcome floor price for oranges, which overseas buyers had to meet," says Swart. This raised fresh orange prices, as many growers opted to send oranges to local juicing factories, dodging packaging and shipping costs.

"Consequently, some exporters reported difficulties in obtaining sufficient oranges for export this season."

Possibly, growers with citrus black spot-blacklisted orchards went this same route and have reaped related benefits. But could this trend continue if juice prices remain high? What would the knock-on effect be on stable to good fresh orange prices (despite the relatively weak demand reported in the Orange Overview in the EU)?

For Egypt, there's been the issue of oversupply, the Red Sea crisis, rising packaging and marketing costs, and being saddled with the plantings that caused the oversupply. In another Fresh Plaza article, Ahmed Heiza, MD of Misr Vision Food Processing Solutions highlights the oversupply as a driver of rapid investment in orange juice. They project that the continued drought and HLB struggles of Brazil and Florida, along with desertification in southern Spain, will have a significant impact on the global supply of oranges and orange juice over the next three to five years. Many reckon that this will continue until a remedy is found for HLB. And Egyptian industrialists are ready to take advantage of this situation, intensifying efforts to import juice production lines, despite the prohibitive cost. Other major orange producing countries are possibly doing likewise and seeking investment opportunities in HLB-free countries.

When life gives you oranges

So, is it time to plant more orange trees? That depends on one's opportunity vs. risk profile. With my farmer's cap on, given the revenue potential of orange juice sales, I'd keep even the moderately producing Valencia trees in my orchard over the next five years.

Factors to consider

HLB remains untreatable while scientists continue to seek suitable treatments. Without them the disease will continue to wreak havoc in countries like Florida, where juice production will likely maintain a steady decline. Plus, extreme weather conditions are probably here to stay.

Our world news and fruit industry publications currently issue daily reports on these occurrences. At the time of writing, there was a report of Hurricane Helene that lay waste to vast farmlands from North-eastern Florida through the eastern part of the Midwest. Fires in Greece are also threatening lemon orchards.

Farming is certainly becoming tougher and riskier, but with risk comes opportunity. Mitigators like plant varieties that are productive and resilient, with low maintenance costs are vital to navigate risks related to turbulent weather conditions. Look no further than the Valencia orange, the fruit of choice for the juice market, with its low Limonin content. An added consideration is planting a premium fresh Valencia variety that covers both bases of a good fresh orange and a juice orange. There are several seedless and low-seeded productive cultivars to choose from that are showing promising results in the CGACC evaluations, like 'Turkey', 'Bennie', 'Gusacora', 'Jassie', as well as new varieties, early 'Kas Valencia', 'Rosy Red Valencia', seedless 'Wonderwhy Midknight', seedless 'Gusacora' and 'Ngonini' early.

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