

# Eastern Cape expects 2011 citrus boom

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The Sundays River Valley in the Eastern Cape is one of the top citrus-producing regions in South Africa which, following good winter rains, expects a bumper crop in 2011.



On arrival the fruit is washed in a light chlorine mixture before entering the packing house. (Image: Emily van Rijswijk)

Less than an hour's drive from Port Elizabeth, the Sundays River Valley has extremely hot summers, when the mercury can shoot up into the 40s, and rather chilly winters, which makes it ideal for growing citrus.

Other citrus-producing areas in the Eastern Cape are in Patensie and Katriver.

South Africa exports 1.3-million tons of citrus every year, and 20% of this comes from the Sundays River Valley.

With fruit being grown there since the early 1920s, the region employs about 30 000 people, says Ken Nieuwenhuizen, managing director of the Sundays River Citrus Company (SRCC).

The SRCC is the packing and marketing representative for the 200 farmers in the area.

The perfect growing conditions also mean that farmers can produce a full range of citrus, from easy-peelers like clementines to thick-skinned lemons.

The lemons, rated as having the best quality and flavour in the country, are the valley's flagship product and are picked throughout the year.

Land reform and empowerment forms an important part of the company's social responsibility focus, says Nieuwenhuizen. To date, the SRCC has bought six farms on which black emerging farmers are trained and developed. More schemes like this are planned for the future.

"Our aim is to have 30% of productive land, currently delivering to SRCC, put into the hands of previously disadvantaged individuals within the next four years. We are looking at new farms becoming available on the market for this purpose," he says.

## **No longer just a winter fruit**

Traditionally thought of as a winter fruit, there are now many citrus cultivars on the market all year round. In the Sundays River Valley the season kicks off in late February, when the first satsumas are picked, and lasts until October when the last of the valencias, an orange cultivar, come off the trees.

Following good winter rains and perfect seasonal conditions, the area expects a bumper crop this year.

SRCC marketing manager Hannes de Waal says they expect a 20% increase in fruit production when the season winds down in October.

## **SA, a major exporter**

South Africa is the second largest exporter of oranges in the world, sending more than half of its annual crop to its main markets in the EU, Russia, the Middle East and the US.

Spain is the world's biggest exporter of citrus at 3.3-million tons per year.

As a perishable product, citrus falls into the Fast Moving Consumer Group category - which means exporting it can be a real challenge.

The season changes from year to year, and depends on a lot of variables such as the overlapping of varieties, especially from competitors in other countries.

The margin for error is small. "It is a commodity game which means prices are unstable and dictated by supply and demand," De Waal says.

The company keeps a very close eye on its main competitors in the southern hemisphere, Argentina in particular.

## **Keep it natural**

The effect of global warming has also been noticed, says technical manager Dave Gerber. "We have noticed our maximum summer temperatures becoming lower and maximum winter temperatures becoming warmer. This has a serious implication for citrus."

In summer the area can be up to 10 degrees hotter than in Port Elizabeth, while the valley becomes extremely cold, but remains frost free, in winter. "The cold conditions are necessary to create that rich colouring in citrus fruit, while the extreme heat of summer adds to the sugar content of the fruit," Gerber says.

The company strives to grow citrus with as little human interference as possible and has a full technical team that assists farmers in the area.

The negative impact of human activities on the environment was brought home in 2005, when the company noticed a marked decline in the valley's fruit yield.

Upon closer inspection it was found that after years of overusing chemicals and artificial fertilisers, the area's soil was completely depleted of microorganisms and trace elements necessary for peak production.

The company stepped in and with the help of the Dutch government, started a compost-manufacturing operation on its property. The compost is extremely rich in microelements and goes through an intensive production process over 21 days, before it is sold to farmers.

Since partnering with Mayibuye Ndlovu Compost, the area has seen an improvement in soil quality.

Mayibuye Ndlovu is a black-owned company that harvests alien vegetation in the valley. It delivers the raw material to the SRCC which, in turn, manufactures the compost for distribution to citrus farmers and commercial buyers in the area.

Through its sustainable spray programme, the SRCC also encourages farmers to make use of insects occurring naturally in the area, rather than rely on chemical sprays. Known as the natural enemy complex, the approach encourages the "soft" use of chemical sprays in the valley, adds Gerber.

One of the most vital resources required for good citrus production is water, which the Sundays River Valley enjoys in abundance.

Fed via a tunnel from the Gariep Dam into the Fish River, the water flows into the upper reaches of the Sundays River and from there into the Darlington Dam, which feeds the valley's irrigation system.

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