

Global demand for avocado has local farmers firmly focused

According to a 2019 report from the European Union titled *Opportunities for South African emerging farmers in the European sustainable market*, even with a 4% global market footprint, South Africa is still punching far below the growing avocado demand, which has seen a steep increase in international market prices.



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Against the background of producers' limited access to quality land, soil and water, the current trend is to increase production per unit area, while simultaneously limiting production costs to optimise profit.

The increase in avocado demand translates into major economic expansion and growth opportunities for the South African industry. In fact, the local industry is growing at more than 1,000 hectares per annum, with further expansion expected in the production of nursery trees.

Last year, the total production was estimated at 170,000 tonnes of which approximately 86,000 tonnes were exported, mainly to Europe and the United Kingdom. Due to global demand and produce year-round, local production is expanding in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern and Western Cape provinces.

Agricultural company, Laevel Agrochem advises avocado farmers to surround themselves with experts in orchard planning and crop cultivation. In addition, precision farming technology can be used to help producers ensure sustainable yields, per unit area, as well as managing cultivation risks.

Soil health and improved yields

Experts at Laevel Agrochem explain that soil with high levels and a wide variety of active micro-organisms is invaluable to farmers. These micro-organisms maintain balance through a symbiotic system that benefits both crops and roots by, among other things, promoting nutrient mineralisation and uptake.

Balance is crucial in this context, says Corné Liebenberg, marketing director. "The more orchard conditions deviate from the ideal, the more technologies and economic inputs are required to achieve acceptable yields," he explains.

Liebenberg further points out that farmers must often make difficult production decisions regarding the choice of new plantings or crops with a view to create and sustain an economic advantage. "Producers must take advantage of a form of farming that will give them an edge. It is only when profit margins become tighter that first-rate producers will see the results of their input."

New markets and growth opportunities

Derek Donkin, CEO of the South African Subtropical Growers' Association (Subtrop) says maintaining global market access for local produce is one of the industry's top priorities for the future. According to Subtrop, the rate of new plantings has increased significantly to supply expected new markets.

"Our long-term plans include making in-roads in new markets such as China, India and the US. If the demand for avocado continues at these high rates, we will have to double our production in ten years," says Donkin. "Currently, we export up to 55% of our avocados and of the remainder between 10% and 12% is used for processing; the rest is sold fresh as fresh produce."

Liebenberg points out that precision farming is not a quick fix, but a valuable long-term investment. "The correct implementation of knowledge and data can have a dramatic and positive impact on soil optimisation and avocado yields. Precision agriculture is one of many modern farming practices that make production more efficient and result in farmers and their soil working better together."

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