



New Roots

an industry in transition
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Welcome to the new beginning

As agriculturalists we all surely have one thing in common, a love for the land and the crops we grow. Therefore, the name of the industry's new transformation publication is so apt –New Roots symbolising a connection between the various aspects of life through deeply rooted pillars of strength and stability that can weather many storms and natural disasters. Synonymous with growth and development within the agricultural environment we find ourselves in.

It's been a tough couple of years for our growers and the industry with unprecedented increases in input costs, exacerbated by the energy crisis and the severe impact of loadshedding on crop volumes and quality, logistical challenges in getting the product to the market whilst maintaining good eating quality. The impact of Covid-19 coupled with the Russian-Ukraine war and subsequent impact on the export and local market, both in terms of demand and market realisation. Unfavourable weather conditions (hail) in both the Ceres and Langkloof production regions during the 2023 harvest affecting many growers – an environmental storm in itself. Leaving no one unscathed and scarred even more so our first-generation growers who hardly have any margin for error.

However, I have learnt that tough times never last, but tough people do and tough times forces people into making innovative plans.

That is why we are returning to our roots! Go back to the drawing board, reposition, and review developmental plans, back to the basics to facilitate and enable stability for our first-generation growers through targeted, needs driven and innovative interventions with Hortgro's newly formed Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC).

Development is not an event but a process and during times of rapid change it requires agility in adapting to the changing environment.

Industry efforts and interventions will prioritize the safeguarding of investments made over the last decade and to build on the successes achieved. Making sure we create and facilitate a conducive environment for all to be able to meaningfully transform our industry in a sustainable manner. This cannot be achieved in isolation and will require partnerships from both the public and private sector. From the industry's side we are excited about the future – we have been busy with the right things and sometimes taking a step back and regrouping is not always a bad thing.



Like the saying goes “'n boer maak 'n plan” and sometimes when plan A does not work out we then try another plan, but collectively we will succeed.

I would like to end of with:

“A tree’s beauty lies in its branches, but its strength lies in its roots.”

– Matshona Dhlwayo

Mariette Kotzé
Group Operations Manager: Hortgro
(Oversight Manager of Transformation)

Meet the new Economic Development Manager

Cynthia Mahlathi looks you square in the eyes when talking to you. And that is good. She listens well and when in conversation, she gets to the point. She is friendly and her smile reaches her eyes.



With a B Agric (SU), Postgraduate Diploma in Project Management (SU) and Postgraduate Diploma in Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (UWC), she's got the right papers to back this new responsibility of managing the Economic Development Committee. But most of all, she's got the passion and desire to get economic development in agriculture to work. Why agriculture?

“One year when I was still very young, it rained so much we couldn't go anywhere, but still needed food. We worked a piece of land with spades and our hands, planting maize one pip at a time. When we eventually started harvesting beautiful maize, it was a valuable moment in my life realising this is actually the work of my hands. From then on I respected farmers and it was good to know agriculture is not just seeing something packaged at the supermarket.”

However, she also realised that she was not meant to farm, but she knew what farmers needed to make a success of their farming. So she embarked on project management at CASIDRA as well as learning as much as she could about land reform, land appropriation without compensation and the reality of farming in South Africa. She kept on asking where are we going in agriculture. After CASIDRA, she joined Hortfin where she fulfilled a project management and administration function.

She says she still wants to understand what the word transformation really means and reckons people sometimes use it quite loosely, but she joined EDAC because it focuses on economic development. That she understands.

“I see myself as an enabler to get the farmers to access the resources that are there, be it from the government or private sector to become more established and sustainable. Even if I can help one out of 10 first generation farmers to succeed, I will feel I've done something.”

She sees this job as an opportunity to combine resources from government and the private sector to offer stronger opportunities to enable farmers or producers in a much better way. The critical factor is farmers need to get the combined resources that is needed and especially when it is needed to get better results. A huge grant or loan is of little use if it is granted too late.

“In a nutshell, I hope the role that I and EDAC will play will alleviate some of those challenges. You need a voice that speaks from the ground and a voice that speaks from the top, but you need to speak the same language. I hope to steer this alignment.”

Amongst her other attributes Cynthia is also a realist. With a smile that reaches her eyes.

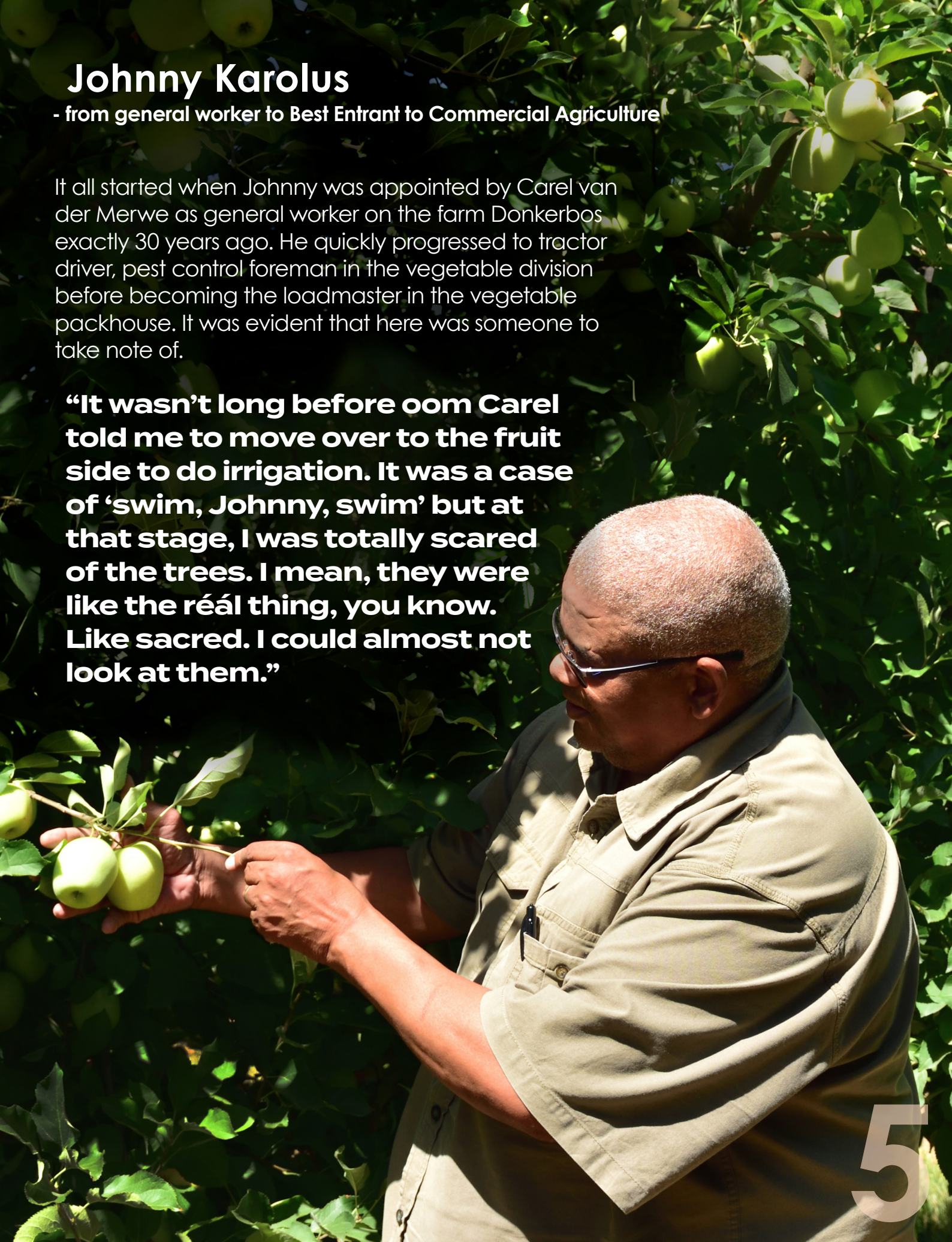
Welcome aboard, Cynthia.

Johnny Karolus

- from general worker to Best Entrant to Commercial Agriculture

It all started when Johnny was appointed by Carel van der Merwe as general worker on the farm Donkerbos exactly 30 years ago. He quickly progressed to tractor driver, pest control foreman in the vegetable division before becoming the loadmaster in the vegetable packhouse. It was evident that here was someone to take note of.

“It wasn’t long before oom Carel told me to move over to the fruit side to do irrigation. It was a case of ‘swim, Johnny, swim’ but at that stage, I was totally scared of the trees. I mean, they were like the réal thing, you know. Like sacred. I could almost not look at them.”



Yet, Johnny made friends with those trees, looked at them, got mentors to teach him and got the irrigation to a level it has never been.

When Inus Oosthuizen was appointed as general manager at Donkerbos, he agreed and promoted Johnny to fruit production manager in 2004. Empowering yourself with knowledge is a strong belief of Johnny and he did every course he could, mostly high above his perceived grade, but always with success. He got involved in all the production practices on the farm in order to obtain as much knowledge as possible.

In the next few years the issue of land reform and helping potential new black farmers to develop became more pressing, especially since the attempts of the government were not really working. So in 2014 the first PALS (Partners in Agri Land Solutions) project, Eyethu Intaba ("our mountain"), was established when Carel purchased Disselfontein over the ridge from Donkerbos and Johnny and 12 co-workers became its shareholders.



**Johnny se geheime resep vir 'n suksesvolle plaas:
"Daar's nie 'n ons en 'n hulle nie, ons is
almal saam. Respek is die groot ding en as
'n bestuurder, hou ek by elke liewe reël en
verwag dieselfde van my mense."**

“At that stage it was not a flourishing enterprise. From the 72 ha fruit, we only salvaged 28 ha,” says Inus, by then the managing director of Donkerbos. However, in a short period everything on Disselfontein was on the same level (or better) than Donkerbos. That is why Disselfontein needed an above average farm manager. Johnny Karolus, who already was chairman of the farming company, Eyethu Intaba by then, was appointed farm manager in 2018.

Although a humble man, he is in charge of what can commercially be seen as a mega farming business. Whatever the purchase price was in 2012, the value has just about quadrupled today.

“During harvesting, he is mostly on his own. He mails me his planning, stats and figures regularly and whether we need to talk or not, but he is full-steam going ahead. Believe me, he is the manager of Disselfontein on merit, looking after a contingent of over 250 people. Categorically, he is one of the top fruit farmers in the Koue Bokkeveld,” replies Inus.

“Ek’t nog altyd groot gedroom, maar nie só groot nie! Die Vader is goed vir my; goed vir ons almal in dié suksesstorie.”

Johnny is an immensely enthusiastic farmer with a huge passion for, and pride in his fruit. Those trees are still sacred to him. Should you ask Johnny how he does it, he'll tell you straight it's all about trust. “There is no us and them here, only us in it together. Respect is key, and as a manager, I follow every rule to the tee and expect everybody to follow suit. I believe you can delegate tasks, but the responsibility is always yours. But never stop empowering, just as you've been empowered,” Johnny concludes.

With this brand of dedication, hard work and belief in himself, it is no wonder he was selected by The Agricultural Writers Association as the best entrant to commercial agriculture in November 2022.



The Fab Four that pack a punch



Anges, Natalie, Danielle and Bevin

The A&B Williams fruit packaging and transport business in Elgin is owned and operated by four people. The two Williams brothers, Anges and Bevin, and their wives, Natalie and Danielle. The business has been active in the industry for 24 years, mainly handling apples and pears.

This is truly a family business, but what makes it even more so, is that the foundation was laid by their father, Basil, who rented the land (where A&B Williams is today) at first and packed by hand. He was immensely respected and liked in the industry which created a lot of trust and support for Anges, Natalie, Bevin

and Danielle when they took over the reigns after Basil died in 1998. At first, they were also renting.

“When we started we started on his good name and reputation. We had no track record but got credit from the fruit farmers and box suppliers. So our reputation grew and we could eventually get purchasing loans from Absa to buy this land,”

Danielle explains.

They were on their way, but in order to grow, they needed to become capable of handling fruit all 12 months of the year. That meant cold storage and therefore they applied successfully for a Hortfin loan for the construction of eight controlled atmosphere cold store rooms. They were also awarded a grant from the Western Cape Department of Agriculture for this project. They started in 1998 with one packhouse for local fruit and today they have three, one for export and two locals. Plus 24 cold storage rooms.

Should you ask them if being a foursome all the time does not sometimes become too much, they just laugh and shake their heads.

On the contrary, they all believe the fact that they are all in it all the time is actually the secret to their success. If there is a decision to be made, they are all right there to discuss and take action.

The proof of how close they really are lies in the fact that they even go on holidays together (when the business allows time, that is!). All of them were born and bred in the small town of Pniel between Stellenbosch and Franschhoek, and guess what? They all still stay there, driving through to Elgin every day.

But what if, on the off chance, they do get into a tiff with each other?

“Then we just keep calm and have a braai together!”
Danielle concludes.



The symbiotic relationship Between Hortgro and PALS

On 19 August 2014 a group of 19 fruit farmers decided to launch a regional initiative for inclusive agricultural growth, job creation and improved social harmony in line with the National Development Plan. This was to become Partners in Agri Land Solutions (PALS).

Right from the start Hortgro was regarded as a very important strategic partner. As commodity organisation of the pome and stone fruit industry with good corporate structures, it was logical that Hortgro would be the most important commodity organisation with whom first Witzenberg Partnership and later PALS would consult and look to for advice.

PALS was aligned with the NDP, but the planning in terms of goals and district was done with reference to Hortgro's published booklet. The 18 000 hectares of planted fruit trees in 2014 in the Witzenberg area as per Hortgro's statistics, was an important figure to set certain goals in terms of the NDP principles. The value of, and investment in fruit orchards as per Hortgro's well kept statistics, were also used to explain to the ministers of Land Reform, Agriculture and Water Affairs that PALS do not regard inclusive agricultural growth as purely a numbers game.

Hortgro's advice, guidance and support over the eight years that PALS has been in existence, is invaluable. From the chairman of the board, CEO, technical officials and especially Mariette Kotzé, there was always an understanding that Hortgro and PALS cooperate and do not compete. Although PALS is today a national organisation and caters for all commodities and types of agricultural enterprises, its roots are firmly within the fruit industry and the majority of PALS enterprises were established by farmers who also farm with some type of fruit.

When the presidency required a plan for the Western Cape regarding land reform, PALS, Hortgro and the Western Cape Department of Agriculture collaborated to present the plan. Hortgro gracefully supported PALS to draft and submit a land reform plan to the Deputy President to which presentation Hortgro's Mariette Kotzé and the Department of Agriculture Western Cape's former HOD Joyene Isaacs provided important inputs.

Similarly PALS provided information and data from its list of potential enterprises and allowed Hortgro to use the job

creation potential of the PALS project list when Hortgro took the lead to apply at the Jobs Fund as part of establishing the Hortfin fund.

"Hortgro is the custodian of the pome and stone fruit industry. For PALS it will always be important to regard Hortgro as an invaluable strategic partner. The positive interactions with Mariette Kotzé and her team assisted PALS to overcome several challenges. The appreciation from both organisations that we need to join hands and allow each entity to do what is in the best interest of the cause of inclusive economic growth, is very rare in South Africa. Going forward, we will be even stronger together, because we plan to work even smarter together," comments Gerrit van Vuuren, strategic advisor of PALS.

"Since my first engagement with Hortgro in 2015, it became apparent that by bringing these two like-minded organisations together, both will gain so much from the combined expert knowledge in Hortgro and PALS," concludes Lennox Plaatjies, National Liaison Officer.

AGT

GOING ON 10

Just over a decade ago the Executive Director of Hortgro, Anton Rabe, had a brainwave. He was pondering that, although agriculture is a business about producing food, it is in essence all about the people producing the food.

Anton was also aware that music can make magic by dismantling walls and boundaries, helping in the healing process of reconciliation and education. Worldwide music is used as a vehicle for social change and bringing communities together.

So Hortgro launched Agri's got Talent (AGT) in 2014 and 2023 will host it's 10th show. Yet, this time round it won't be a competition but a glitzy and glamorous musical feast! Not even Covid could silence the singing and it has grown to a countrywide fruit industry event of stature. And in its wake AGT has left many contestants (not only winners) that became more able to plough their gain back into communities because of newfound confidence and life skills as well as being role models for their people.

With AGT, agriculture becomes a people's story where music is the equaliser, bringing people from all walks of life together in harmony. And help them grow.

**May the next 10
years of AGT also
never go out of tune.**

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Stone fruit producers can find monthly production tips in Hortgro's Timely Hints

TIMELY HINTS

[Home](#) » [Timley Hints – Tydige Wenke April 2023](#)

Fresh Quarterly is our technical online magazine about everything you need to know to make a success of your orchard

QUARTERLY

FOR THE DECIDUOUS FRUIT GROWER

QUARTERLY

FOR THE DECIDUOUS FRUIT GROWER

Luister na Wiehann Steyn van Hortgro Science wat oor die stompkopkewer praat en die gevaar wat dit vir ons bedryf inhou

Stompkopkewer

Fresh Notes is the technical newsletter from Hortgro Science

FRESH NOTES

Polyphagous shot-hole borer beetle is threatening our deciduous fruit trees.

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Polyphagous Shot-Hole Borer (PSHB)