HORTGRO

Growing Fruit IQ

New Roots

Volume 11 March 2026

The Root Map

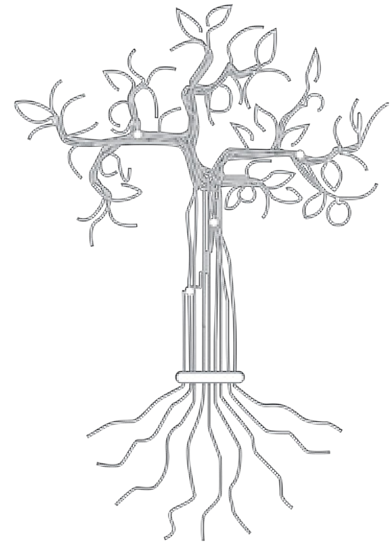
Setting the tone for the year ahead

Foreword by Cynthia Mahlathi,
Hortgro'sEconomic Development Manager

The start of a new year invites more than a review of plans and projections; it calls for reflection on the kind of industry we are collectively shaping. Transformation, by its nature, is not a single intervention or milestone, but a long-term commitment to building systems that are fairer, more resilient, and capable of carrying shared prosperity into the future. It requires patience, intention, and honest reflection on how progress is made and for whom.

Transformation therefore demands more than participation; it requires alignment.

In 2026, the deciduous fruit industry stands at a moment when progress and pressure coexist. There is tangible momentum in production performance, orchard maturity, and market opportunity. At the same time, constraints within our operating environment, from logistics and infrastructure to climate-related risks, continue to test the strength and inclusivity of our systems. These realities remind us that growth, when not supported by resilient and accountable structures, remains vulnerable.



Transformation therefore demands more than participation; it requires alignment. Alignment between ambition and implementation, between policy and practice, and between those who bear risk and those who shape the systems within which that risk is borne. It is within this context that collaboration, capacity development, and shared accountability become not optional ideals but foundational requirements for sustainable industry growth.

I am often reminded of this balance during my daily commute. Watching the morning traffic unfold, it is striking how preparation, or the lack of it, shapes outcomes. Those who leave early, plan their route and respect the flow, tend to move steadily forward. Others, arriving late and rushing to make up time, weave through traffic, take shortcuts, and disrupt the system. While these manoeuvres may seem efficient in the moment, they often create congestion, frustration, and risks for others on the road.

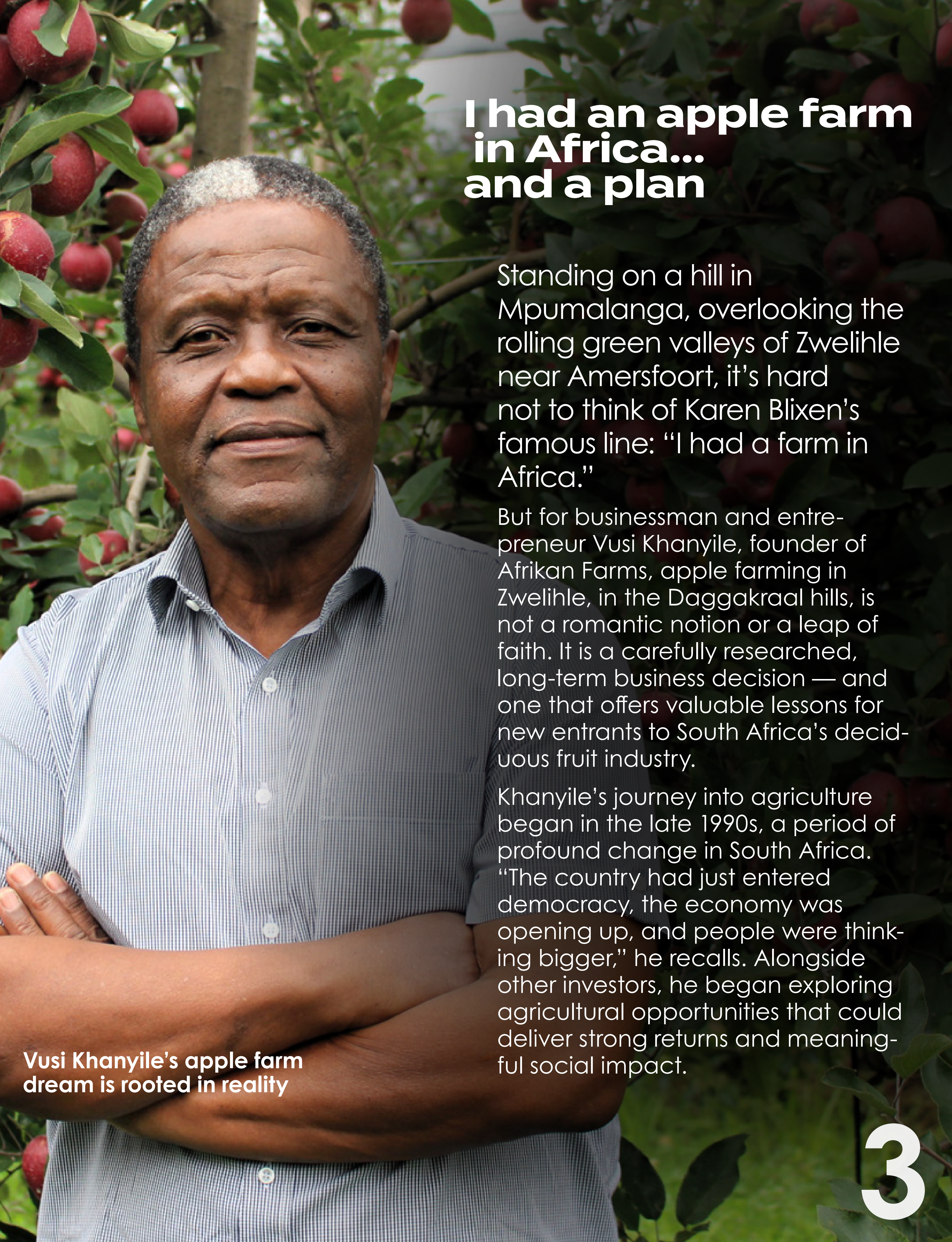
Our industry operates in much the same way. Sustainable progress cannot be built on shortcuts. It requires preparation, shared rules of the road, and recognition that long-term success depends on how well the system works for all, not just on how quickly a few move ahead. The work of transformation, capacity development, and industry growth demands patience, consistency, and collective responsibility.

This first issue of New Roots for the year reflects that mindset. It speaks to an industry focused on doing the foundational work properly, strengthening production systems, investing in people, clarifying our language and intent, and building partnerships that endure beyond individual projects or cycles. The stories and programmes featured here highlight what is possible when time and effort are invested early in people and enterprise development through collaboration, rather than by ticking boxes.

As we look ahead to the rest of 2026, the emphasis is clear: steady progress over speed, preparation over pressure, and shared purpose over individual gain.

This year calls for trust in the process and for each of us to play our part in keeping the road ahead open, fair, and moving forward.

The work of transformation, capacity development, and industry growth demands patience, consistency, and collective responsibility.



I had an apple farm in Africa… and a plan

Vusi Khanyile's apple farm dream is rooted in reality

Standing on a hill in Mpumalanga, overlooking the rolling green valleys of Zwelihle near Amersfoort, it's hard not to think of Karen Blixen's famous line: "I had a farm in Africa."

But for businessman and entrepreneur Vusi Khanyile, founder of Afrikan Farms, apple farming in Zwelihle, in the Daggakraal hills, is not a romantic notion or a leap of faith. It is a carefully researched, long-term business decision — and one that offers valuable lessons for new entrants to South Africa's deciduous fruit industry.

Khanyile's journey into agriculture began in the late 1990s, a period of profound change in South Africa. "The country had just entered democracy, the economy was opening up, and people were thinking bigger," he recalls. Alongside other investors, he began exploring agricultural opportunities that could deliver strong returns and meaningful social impact.

While modest in size, the orchard represents something far bigger: a new apple-growing region and a new generation of growers.

At the time, concerns were growing that traditional farming systems in parts of Mpumalanga—largely focused on cattle and maize— were limiting both economic potential and job creation. The group investigated alternative, higher-value crops and consulted widely, including with agricultural economists and academics. Apples emerged as a serious contender.

"There was already proof," Khanyile explains. "Early settlers had planted apple trees near their homes, and they thrived. That told us the climate and soils could work."

Afrikan Farms, a 100% BBBEE enterprise owned by the Vusi Khanyile Trust, was established in 2000. Years later, that early research translated into trees in the ground.

Today, Afrikan Farms has four hectares of apples under netting, established in phases in 2017 and 2018. While modest in size, the orchard represents something far bigger: a new apple-growing region and a new generation of growers.

The orchard produces Royal Gala, Granny Smith and Sundowner, carefully selected to spread the harvest from January to April. Fruit is currently sold mainly through fresh produce markets.

But Khanyile is candid about the realities. "At this scale, it's not yet commercially viable. Price volatility and post-harvest costs are high, and the learning curve is steep. But we now have proof that apples can succeed here — if the right support structures are in place."

Khanyile is well aware that apple farming is highly technical, capital-intensive, and unforgiving of mistakes.

Inspecting the new site where soon 15 hectares of apples will be planted

Team Afrikan Farms with Hortfin's Mariette Kotzé. From left to right, Sbo Mathenjwa, Nsika Shabalala, Nadia Lundall-Coetzer, Mariette Kotzé, and Vusi Khanyile

People make the difference

Afrikan Farms' progress, particularly in apple farming, is driven by a committed team under farm manager Nsika Shabalala. Sbo Mathenjwa, Technical and Apple Production Manager, has embraced the complexity of pome fruit production, attending advanced training in Grabouw and applying that knowledge on the farm.

Operations Manager Nadia Lundall-Coetzer describes the early years as "learning at full speed". "I used to think apples were just red or green," she laughs. "Now I'm explaining cultivars, harvest windows and post-harvest protocols to friends."

Beyond production, the team had to master logistics, packing, compliance and market realities — areas that often surprise first-time growers. "It can feel overwhelming," says Lundall-Coetzer, "but we believe in 'aanhouer wen' — perseverance wins."

Currently, Afrikan Farms employs two permanent orchard workers and around 25 seasonal staff. The long-term vision is far more ambitious.

Scaling up with the right partners

Expansion plans aim to increase the orchard's area from 4 to 19 hectares over a phased period, unlocking economies of scale and long-term sustainability. The goal is to export 80% of production as Class 1 and Class 2 fruit, with the balance processed.

Achieving this requires more than capital. It requires technical expertise, governance, accreditation, and access to blended finance — a combination of grants, loans, and technical support tailored to pre-commercial farms.

That's where Hortfin and Techno Serve, supported by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), entered the picture.

According to Melanie Machingawuta, Senior Director of Inclusive Investment at TechnoServe, Afrikan Farms reflects exactly the type of enterprise they aim to support. "It is black-owned, includes strong female participation, creates rural jobs and started below commercial scale. With the right support, it can graduate into a fully sustainable business."

The expansion will also prioritise GlobalG.A.P. accreditation, longer employment periods due to extended harvests, and skills development within the local community.

Khanyile believes the biggest mistake new entrants can make is trying to do it alone. "Tree crops test your patience," he says. "You don't walk this road by yourself. You need partners — technical, financial and human."

His advice to aspiring growers is clear:

- Do your homework
- Start with evidence, not assumptions
- Build the right team
- Secure technical support early
- Think long-term — apples are a marathon, not a sprint.

"It has been a long journey," he reflects. "Planting trees teaches you that success takes time. But when you get it right, the impact goes far beyond the orchard."

For South Africa's next generation of apple growers, Afrikan Farms is proof that with planning, partnerships and persistence, new roots can take hold — even in unexpected places.

Rolling hills of Mpumalanga

Hortfin enters new "green" partnership with UK Government unlocking economic development

Dr Iraj Abedian (AFF), Lisa Weedon, Deputy British High Commissioner to South Africa and Hortfin's Mariette Kotzé at the launch

A pioneering blended finance partnership between the UK Government, South African development financiers, industry bodies and implementing agencies is demonstrating how collaboration can unlock commercial opportunities for farmers in Mpumalanga, helping to build alternative economic pathways as the region undergoes its energy transition.

In coal-dependent provinces like Mpumalanga, where the shift to a low-carbon economy is reshaping the local economic landscape, new sources of growth are essential. Blended finance supports this shift by using public funds to reduce investment risk and crowd in private capital. This enables farmers to scale their operations, create jobs and build sustainable, climate-resilient businesses.

"The UK is committed to supporting South Africa in transitioning to a low-carbon economy. Through this blended finance model, we are working with local partners to pilot innovative solutions that unlock further investment, support the diversification of Mpumalanga's economy and create jobs," said Lisa Weedon, Deputy British High Commissioner to South Africa at the launch on 11 February 2026.

Through its implementing partner, TechnoServe, the UK has partnered with two agri-financiers – Hortfin and Agri Finance Facility (AFF), to support two pilot investments in

Mpumalanga. The UK's contribution helps de-risk commercial investment and unlock new opportunities for pre-commercial agri-businesses.

This new blended finance partnership between Hortfin and the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) is set to expand access to affordable, sector-specific funding for emerging farmers, with a strong focus on transformation, job creation and regional growth.

other lenders and contributing to the creation of 2 795 new jobs, predominantly in the Western Cape.

However, Kotzé stressed that meaningful expansion requires strategic partnerships. Through the FCDO's DevCap grant, implemented by TechnoServe in collaboration with Hortgro, Hortfin is now piloting its blended-finance model in Mpumalanga — a province identified for future growth in pome, stone and citrus production.

The first project under the partnership will support Afrikan Farms in expanding its apple production from four hectares to 19 hectares ...

Speaking at the launch, Hortfin CEO Mariette Kotzé described the collaboration as a significant step forward in deploying development finance "in a practical and scalable way" to support first-generation black farmers in capital-intensive sectors such as deciduous fruit, table grapes and wine grapes.

Established in 2018 as a R500 million, industry-led public-private partnership, Hortfin was created to address what Kotzé termed the agricultural sector's "missing middle" — the gap between traditional commercial finance and the realities faced by emerging farming enterprises. Over eight years, the fund has grown its loan book to R474 million, leveraging an additional R200 million from

The first project under the partnership will support Afrikan Farms in expanding its apple production from four hectares to 19 hectares, laying the foundations for a commercially viable enterprise expected to create an estimated 85 new jobs. Importantly, the model goes beyond finance, providing technical, marketing and insurance support to address production and climate-related risks.

Kotzé highlighted that the intrduction of concessionary loans at prime minus 4% marks a first for Hortfin, enabled by blending development and commercial capital. "This partnership allows us to bridge the space between risk and opportunity," she said, noting that development capital provides the confidence needed to enter new regions and support pre-commercial ventures.

She added that collaboration with the FCDO and TechnoServe has strengthened Hortfin's approach by embedding environmental and social impact considerations alongside financial sustainability.

Highlighting the broader vision, TechnoServe's Melanie Machingawuta said: "After seven years of working with the UK Government to tackle global poverty, our focus in South Africa now connects directly to the just energy transition and agricultural transformation. Afrikan Farms shows how partnership and blended finance can turn a pre-commercial farm into an export-ready commercial model that attracts further investment.

Collectively, partners agree that blended finance, anchored in collaboration, technical support and market integration, is more than a funding tool. It is a scalable driver for inclusive growth in Mpumalanga's transition to a low-carbon economy.

It is a scalable driver for inclusive growth in Mpumalanga's transition to a low-carbon economy.

Hortfin's team with Lisa Weedon, Deputy British High Commissioner to South Africa (second from right), Amy-Lee Lewis, Dirk Crafford, Mariette Kotzé, Ms Weedon and Saadick Samaai

What is the
Deciduous Fruit Production Scheme?

Transformation in agriculture is often described in terms of targets, timelines, and percentages. Yet on the ground, it is experienced very differently. For producers, workers, and value-chain partners, transformation is about whether a business can survive, grow, and meaningfully participate in the economy over time. In a capital-intensive sector such as deciduous fruit, transformation cannot be rushed without risking failure. It requires deliberate planning, coordination, and a long-term view.

The Deciduous Fruit Industry Production Scheme is the industry's response to this reality, built on existing initiatives. Developed as an industry-led public-private partnership, the scheme provides a practical framework for turning transformation commitments into action on farms, in packhouses, and across markets. It is designed to operationalise the Agriculture and Agro-Processing Master Plan (AAMP) through a commodity-based, value-chain approach, moving away from isolated interventions towards coordinated, industry-wide implementation. This approach reflects a long-standing commitment to alignment and collaboration across the industry.

At its core, the scheme recognises that transformation in the pome- and stone-fruit industries cannot be measured by land ownership alone. Establishing or replacing orchards requires time, capital, technical expertise, and access to markets. Without the right support, expansion puts producers and value-chain enterprises at risk. For this reason, the Production Scheme places enterprise sustainability at the centre of transformation, focusing on productivity, profitability, skills development, and market readiness as the building blocks of inclusive growth.

Why the Scheme matters

Despite sustained efforts over many years, black participation in the deciduous fruit industry remains

At its core, the scheme recognises that transformation in the pome- and stone-fruit industries cannot be measured by land ownership alone.

limited and unevenly distributed. Many black-owned orchards operate under challenging conditions, including ageing trees, infrastructure constraints, limited access to affordable financing, and demanding export compliance requirements. These conditions leave impacts unaddressed, threaten business continuity, and undermine transformation outcomes.

The Production Scheme responds directly to these realities. It prioritises orchard replacement and restoration not because it immediatly increases ownership statistics, but because it preserves existing investments, improves productivity, and gives businesses a chance to become stable and competitive. In this way, transformation is seen as strengthening existing investments rather than pursuing growth at any cost.

A realistic and evidence-based target

Instead of setting targets disconnected from practical capacity, the Production Scheme adopts a pragmatic interim goal to support the establishment and/or replacement of at least 1000 hectares of productive orchards under black ownership by 2031. This includes +/- 600 hectares of orchard replacement and +/- 400 hectares of selected expansion in high-potential areas.

Although ambitious, this target reflects realistic assessments of land availability, water access, infrastructure, and funding potential. Importantly, it recognises that success depends on sustained collaboration and shared commitment from both public- and private-sector partners.

Corridor-based implementation

A feature of the production scheme is its corridor-based approach. Priority production corridors have been identified across the Western and Eastern Cape, the Free State, and Mpumalanga, each shaped by local agricultural conditions, infrastructure realities, and market access.

It ensures that support is applied strategically rather than uniformly, thereby strengthening established production regions while enabling expansion and value-addition where conditions allow. It also creates opportunities for coordinated investment in shared infrastructure, such as packhouses, cold storage, and processing facilities, which are critical for long-term competitiveness.

Integrated support for producers

The production scheme recognises that partial support is insufficient. To succeed, enterprises require a fully integrated package that includes blended finance, infrastructure

In this way, transformation is seen as strengthening existing investments rather than pursuing growth at any cost.

investment, dedicated extension services and mentorship, compliance support for export markets, and access to research to enable informed decision-making. This integrated approach considers the enterprise's full development potential, rather than relying on interim, short-term solutions.

Transformation as economic development

Beyond primary production, the Production Scheme positions transformation as a broader economic development tool focused on strengthening black-owned enterprises and enabling participation in value chains, which in turn support job creation, rural development, export competitiveness, and long-term sustainability.

The Deciduous Fruit Production Scheme becomes a roadmap for moving from aspiration to implementation, grounded in evidence, collaboration, and an honest understanding of what sustainable transformation requires.

This integrated approach considers the enterprise's full development potential, rather than relying on interim, short-term solutions.

Maintanable transformation compared to short term solutions

Longterm view

Realistic assesements of existing inititatives

Strategic intergrated support

Stable and competitive businesses

Coordinated industry wide implementation

Meaningfull participation.

Shortterm view

Targets on paper

Uniform and partial support

Ownership statistics

Isolated interventions

Targets, timelines, percentages.

Lost in transformation

New Roots is a communication tool that keeps stakeholders informed about what's happening in the current space of the deciduous fruit industry. It showcases progress, highlights gaps and opportunities, and shares real stories from growers and partners across the value chain. But to get the communication right, we need to get the terminology right when addressing them.

To begin with, let's look at the term "transformation". In the (not so) new South Africa, the word "transformation" has become a buzzword, a politically correct term, and one often misused. The Oxford Dictionary defines transformation as "a marked change in form, nature, or appearance." The most common example of transformation is a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, in other words, a metamorphosis. At its core, transformation is about creating a life that's authentically yours, one that's meaningful and fulfilling.

Therefore, used correctly in context, transformation has relevance. However, when it comes to describing farmers who have become, are becoming, or will, in due time, be successful agricultural producers, in other words, those who have been or are being transformed, what is the right term to describe them?

Let's return to the caterpillar and butterfly metaphor. There are thick and thin caterpillars, green ones, yellow ones, some with brown dots on the side, long ones, short ones, and more. And the thing is, they all metamorphose into butterflies. Big ones, small ones, different shapes and colours, but all butterflies, part of *Lepidoptera*.

Comparing the abovementioned metamorphoses with those of previously disadvantaged people who dream of becoming farmers and, through resilience, grit, fortunate opportunities and the right attitude and will, become successful commercial farmers, you will see there are just as many variants as in *Lepidoptera*.

Black farmers, brown farmers, Indian farmers. Emerging farmers, but another farmer will tell you they have been at it for 30 years, making them an established farmer. Some are new-generation or new-era farmers, where the first refers to an age group and the latter to a period in history. From a policy perspective, Hortgro Economic Development uses the terms "previously disadvantaged" or "black," as defined in the BBBEE Act. But does that not make it too political? And referring to the BBBEE Act every time you write about these farmers is cumbersome. We need a single, descriptive, non-political, creative buzzword. A name that sticks. In classical advertising terms, it's known as a love-mark.

Moving forward from this point of view, if we accept the thinking and meaning behind the term transformation as what we want it to be, then a useful way to define the diverse group of farmers in the Hortgro Economic Development category is to talk about "transforming farmers".

When it comes to describing farmers who have become, are becoming, or will, in due time, be successful agricultural producers, in other words, those who have been or are being transformed, what is the right term to describe them?

Yet, from a previously disadvantaged farmer to a commercially producing farmer, the farmer remains a farmer.

Yet, going back to the core meaning of transformation, there might be a problem. Maybe the ref is now asking the TMO to adjudicate here. It's the concept of metamorphosis, meaning a change from one object (phase) into another. A caterpillar is not the same as a butterfly. Yet, from a previously disadvantaged farmer to a commercially producing farmer, the farmer remains a farmer. That has undergone a process called evolution.

"Evolution" is defined as "the gradual development of something over time, adapting to changes in its environment to improve". If we accept this definition, we can describe the process that is Hortgro Economic Development's reason to be as: the evolution of previously disadvantaged farmers in South Africa.

Then all these farmers, be it established, emerging, black, brown, new-era or generation, whatever, you name it, can all be grouped under one umbrella: Evolving farmers. Not evolved, because even if you are an established farmer with decades of experience, evolution is never-ending.

What do you think of it? Would you be interested in becoming an evolving farmer? We would love your comments.

Please email **alisa@hortgro.co.za.** After all, this is an evolving story.

To be continued ...

Into the fast lane with Hortgro's Skills Accelerator Project

Recardo Volmink shareholder in Doornkloof SEB and his mentor Peter Dall

Being successful is not only about who you know, but how much you know.

The name Hortgro Skills Accelerator Project (HSAP) was coined when Hortgro approached the Jobs Fund to collaborate and assist in helping previously disadvantaged farmers acquire farming business skills as quickly and efficiently as possible. Hortgro has been helping new and emerging farmers since the early years, at the technical, economic, and institutional levels, but it was time to formalise the programme.

Introducing the Jobs Fund into the equation. They met Hortgro on a one-to-one basis, financially. However, the Jobs Fund was intended to create jobs, which was good in the broader scheme of things. Reducing unemployment is a key driver of Hortgro's operations. The Hortgro Skills Accelerator Project was formally established, bringing on board 30 qualifying farming enterprises.

HSAP addresses the limited, critical, technical, and financial business support needs of previously disadvantaged deciduous fruit producers through a tailored capacity-building approach.

Recardo Volmink and Peter Dall

HSAP is designed to enhance the capacity of the agricultural sector through three key components: capacity building/business coaching, intern and graduate placements, and business development support. This implementation plan details the steps, timelines, responsibilities, and resources required for each component to achieve the project's objectives.

HSAP addresses the limited, critical, technical, and financial business support needs of previously disadvantaged deciduous fruit producers through a tailored capacity-building approach. These constraints are addressed through comprehensive business coaching programmes that meet the needs of businesses. Secondly, it provides comprehensive support for graduates and the internship placement programme by providing stipends to remove barriers to placements (primarily due to lack of accommodation, transport, or stipends). For the placement programme, support includes the provision of resources specific to each placement.

The outcomes included improved, sustainable businesses; development of each agri-preneur's business capabilities; upskilled graduates with practical workplace experience; and increased employability. The business development support entails assisting new entrants and emerging deciduous fruit farmers with resources to enter the industry or expand their operations. This includes completing business and whole-farm plans, as well as facilitating access to finance through available funding institutions.

HSAP provides farms with a holistic approach to identifying their real needs. And how to find solutions for it. It might not be a spanking new tractor, but rather financial training, with the special online HSAP programme called Finance for Non-Financial Managers, helping the production manager to understand what the financial manager means. Bringing the cost of production and selling for a profit in line. The more skills, the bigger the success.

It has been important for HSAP to meet the Jobs Fund deliverables, but never at the expense of the beneficiaries, the farmers. The primary purpose was to help these farms develop a sustainable business plan for the future. Which, in turn, helps to create more jobs. Which, in any case, is the key deliverable of the Jobs Fund.

To strengthen the project, HSAP assembled a team of industry experts to collaborate with emerging farmers, sharing practical knowledge and experience to build skills and support a holistic approach to farming as a business.

HSAP, in collaboration with the Jobs Fund, is a 24-month project that is coming to a successful end in March of this year. Great, that was wonderful for the participating 30 farms, but the deciduous fruit industry has many more farms. What now?

The good news is that, as part of the Jobs Fund partnership requirements, a project must demonstrate sustainability beyond the Jobs Fund contractual obligations, and Hortgro has made provisions for the programme's continuation. Given the measurable success of this first phase over the past two years, HSAP has secured funding from various sources to sustain momentum going forward; however, to meet the holistic requirements, additional resources are needed.

The HSAP will continue. If you want to get involved, either as an economic development contributor or as a new farmer seeking new skills, contact our Hortgro Economic Development Desk.

HSAP provides farms with a holistic approach to identifying their real needs. And how to find solutions for it.

Achtertuin is at the forefront of giving back to the industry

For their small size, Achtertuin is making a big difference when it comes to mentorship.

Steven Versfeld, the custodian of Achtertuin, a small farm and pack-house in the Witzenberg district, and production manager Anieta Solomon are staunch believers in mentoring new entrants into the agricultural sector.

"Lona Odendaal convinced me that getting into mentoring is the route to give something back to the industry. Anieta and I agreed. It needs to be done. We have been doing this for three years now for three interns, and every time we hope to secure funding from AgriSETA, Elsenburg, or the colleges, but we don't always get it. We still do it. For the good of agriculture.

Steven Versfeld and production manager Anieta Solomon

If funding is available, we can pay the interns a pro-rata increase; otherwise, the minimum wage applies. However, the interns we have had thus far have not been here for the money, nor are they now. They know and accept they're here for the knowledge," Steven starts explaining.

Under the watchful eye of Anieta, they are now accommodating Elvino Pietersen, their third intern. Jaydon Slinger, the first student, failed some of his subjects, but Steven and Anieta urged him on. Instead of the required year, he stayed on Achtertuin for two years to complete all his subjects for his full qualification. Today he works in season in the laboratory at Ceres Fruit Growers.

The biggest contribution interns make is conducting quality control after the fruit is picked, as they are from outside and working toward a more senior position. This makes them ideal for this evaluation.

Because Achtertuin is 50 ha, a small concern that does not require a large workforce, the highest position an intern can reach there is supervisor. After completing their qualifications and internships, they are ready for a role at a much higher level. They have to move on, but they also have the knowledge to do so. "It's very rewarding to help them through their internships, seeing them gain experience, but letting go is always a bit sad. Yet they stay in contact, letting us know how things are going, sometimes

True, they make a contribution to the farm, but it is much more about what contribution we can make to their lives and knowledge.

still asking for a bit of advice," Anieta says. She adds that she was also a student at Koue Bokkeveld Opleidingsentrum and knows what it feels like not to know what's expected. Having a mentor pointing you in the right direction makes life on the farm so much clearer and more rewarding.

"Kynan Botes, our second intern, wanted to know more and more and ended up staying longer. We're always happy to let them stay on. True, they contribute to the farm, but it is much more about what contribution we can make to their lives and knowledge. With his qualification and successful completion of his internship, Kynan is now a project manager at Koelfontein on the Koue Bokkeveld side of Hamlet," Anieta adds.

Choosing an intern is a crucial part of the process. You need someone who is driven, eager to learn, and determined to succeed." Take Kynan, for instance," Anieta says, "when he arrived, he knew absolutely nothing about fruit farming, but he was driven, enthusiastic, and seriously eager to learn from the start. With someone like that, you can go far because they want to learn more. And more. It was always 'why this?' and 'why that?'. Alongside that, you need a candidate with strong leadership qualities and, above all, honesty. If you make a mistake, take it on the chin."

"I never want to work with someone who just wants to finish their year of internship, doing as little as possible. Somebody walking around with a kind of 'never you mind' attitude. With a person like that, I won't be able to cope," Steven reckons.

The mentoring extends beyond teaching interns the farming and packing processes. After hours, Steven and Anieta often sit with them, providing information and insights on their tasks and projects, helping them align theory and practice.

Ultimately, interns work through Lona, who serves as the bridge between them and the farms that are keen to help. If there are problems or incompatibilities, she is the arbiter, resolving potential hiccups. "We only see her once every three, sometimes even six months. Other than that, she connects to the interns and sometimes to us via WhatsApp," Anieta says. Clearly, Achtertuin runs its processes like a well-oiled machine.

All of life is a circle. Some years ago, Anieta qualified at Koue Bokkeveld Opleidingsentrum and thereafter needed to learn the ropes of real farming. She needed mentorship. Steven coached her. However, today she is the mentor supplying the mentoring to the newbies. The interns she sends into the real world of agriculture will, in due time, mentor new, keen interns.

And so, it grows.

It’s a question of mentorship

Mark Boerlage farms on the 40 ha farm Sparrenburg, just outside Ceres, with a small team, but he is doing big work when it comes to mentoring.

It takes a special kind of person to dedicate quality time to interns from Elsenburg, Boland College, CPUT and other academic institutions, helping to make good farmers of them.

Especially when your operation does not have the capacity to employ any new managers and you use your insight and knowledge to hone them so they can secure a decent job on a larger farm. But then, farming and farmers are all part of one big community with a common goal. To produce the best quality food possible.

Lona Odendaal started with five students in 2011 and today manages 42 students in the internship mentoring programme in association with Hortgro. Mark Boerlage at Sparrenburg is one of her real stalwarts in the program.

“I’ve been doing this programme with Lona for more than a decade. I really wanted to do it to help new

Mentorship in action

people in agriculture become real farmers, but at the beginning I didn't know how to go about it or what to do with them. I think, at first, my expectations and theirs were different. They thought they were going to walk into management and didn't enjoy starting at square one," Mark explains. "It was also about age. In came this youngster with a diploma, and the older, more experienced people weren't prepared for him. Later on, I briefed my people better on who this intern is, what their role is, and why they're here."

He also realised that it was all about selecting the right candidates. For him, the right person is someone who is genuinely keen to learn to farm and who understands that the starting point is being a general worker, with hands in the soil.

"So from then on, Lona would pre-select three or four potential candidates, and I would sit with them to explain the process. I learnt to identify the right person, the one who wanted to learn what I could teach them. Farming. Because that's what we do at Sparrenburg. We do not do research, marketing or have a packhouse. We produce. And the intern must first prove to the rest of the team that he can work and keep up with them. Before he can give commands to other workers, he must know exactly what those workers do, picking fruit with them," says Mark. However, as soon as he feels the intern is coping, he upgrades him to be an additional supervisor, helping to lighten the load of his foreman.

Mark stresses that he is not there to babysit them. They have to cope and learn. "They have to do quite a lot of tasks, based on the learning process on the farm, and some of them try to hand over their tasks to me to do for them, but it doesn't work like that. I am in this to talk to them, yes, to help them, but they need to do their own tasks, with my input and experience as a guideline."

The arrangement with Lona's programme is that the intern comes to a farm for a year to gain practical learning experience. However, Mark prefers to look at a three-year period with interns who show real promise. He says that if you look at any recruitment advertisement for a farming job, it asks for at least three years' experience. He is helping them to get there.

"Those interns who say very little, do less, and ask no questions come for a year, but if they have no potential and add no value to the farm, that's where it ends. Yet if they have what it takes, I will help them come of age over a three-year period.

And all his questions make you rethink the reasons why, and in this process, you discover even better methods and ways to do things.

My previous intern, Ayden Mietas, walked out of here after three years into a good position at Koelfontein."

At present, the intern at Sparrenburg, Ruan September, is also in his third year. Although he knew nothing about fruit farming when he arrived, he is showing great promise. At the end of the year, Ruan will be scanning the marketplace with his CV, and included in that will be a positive and supportive testimonial from Mark, his mentor, taking him from a raw academic to someone who understands farming.

Mentor Mark and intern Ruan

"Before coming to Sparrenburg, I knew nothing about the deciduous fruit industry," responds Ruan. "But getting to know it was awesome. Mark taught me a lot and answered many of my questions, helping me gain insight and understanding. I hope to stay in the fruit industry. My CV is ready. I will start shopping soon."

Should you ask Mark why he is so involved in this project, he would say, of course, it is because he believes in ploughing back and helping more people become contributors in agriculture in SA. But to him, there is also another great motivator. "It's so easy to stagnate in your work, knowing you do the right thing, but not really remembering why it is the right thing. It is the way you've been doing it for a long time. But then you get an intern who is curious, constantly asking questions. Why this? Why like that? And suddenly, through those questions, you are sharpening your own pencil. Suddenly those questions refresh your own memory. Rekindle your understanding, making you remember the reasons behind the actions. You relearn what you have actually forgotten. And all his questions make you rethink the reasons why, and in this process you discover even better methods and ways to do things. His questions become your teacher, too."

Yes, in the end, the question of mentorship is all about the questions being asked. Makes you think, doesn't it?

Technical Roots -
Access to free online resources and training

Timely Hints – Tydige Wenke
February 2026

CLICK!

DOWNLOADS	DOWNLOADS
Format: PDF	Format: PDF
File size: 632.60 KB	File size: 608.51 KB
Download (Eng)	Download (Afr)
View File	View File

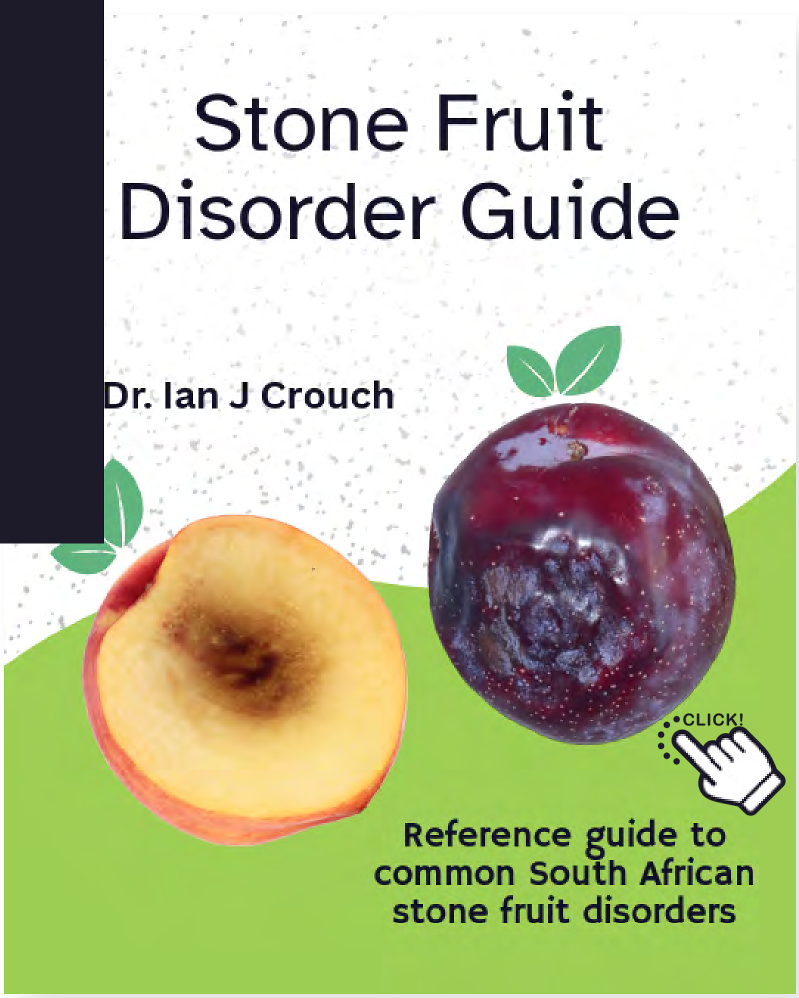
Fresh Notes 228
Restrictions on the Use of Plant Protection Products on Deciduous fruit for 2025/26 – VERSION 3

DOWNLOADS
Format: PDF
File size: 312.99 KB
Download
View File

CLICK!

Fresh Notes 229
Critical Water Shortages Irrigation Guidelines for Deciduous Fruit Trees

DOWNLOADS
Format: PDF
File size: 311.88 KB
Download (Eng)
View File



Visit
Hortgro CLICK!
and
Hortgro Science CLICK!

for more resources and informtaion

Why you should attend the Hortgro Technical Symposium

For new entrants to South Africa's deciduous fruit industry, attending the Hortgro Technical Symposium 2026 is not just beneficial — it is essential.

The Symposium is the industry's premier technical gathering, bringing together leading researchers, technical specialists, industry bodies and commercial growers under one roof. For those establishing themselves in pome- and stone-fruit production, it offers direct access to the latest science, production innovations, plant health strategies, cultivar developments and market-driven insights that shape profitability and sustainability.

The Symposium provides evidence-based guidance grounded in local research and practical experience — helping growers avoid costly mistakes and adopt best practices from the outset.

It is a platform for building relationships with researchers, technical advisors, input suppliers and fellow growers.

The Symposium provides evidence-based guidance grounded in local research and practical experience — helping growers avoid costly mistakes and adopt best practices from the outset. The two Field Days, in particular, are prime examples of interactive, practical show-and-tell knowledge exchange.

Beyond technical knowledge, the value of the event lies in connection, about who you can call when problems arise. The Symposium provides a platform for building relationships with researchers, technical advisors, input suppliers and fellow growers.

Importantly, the industry is evolving rapidly in response to climate pressure, shifting global markets and regulatory changes. New entrants who engage early in industry conversations position themselves to compete effectively and sustainably to understand not only current production practices but also where the industry is heading.

For those serious about building resilient, commercially viable orchards, the Hortgro Technical Symposium 2026 is more than a conference. It is an investment in knowledge, relationships and long-term success in South Africa's deciduous fruit sector.

A roundtable at the 2024 Hortgro Technical Symposium