



- 1 The Root Map
- He who pays, says
- 3 Bridging transformation and
global markets
- 6 Johnny Karolus' advice for
future farmers
- 8 Technical Roots -
Watch out for those unwanted pests
- 10 From Wellington via
Italy to Kromco
- 13 Invest in your people
- 14 Ten questions to Jason Baartman



New Roots

an industry in transition

Volume 8 - March 2025



The Root Map

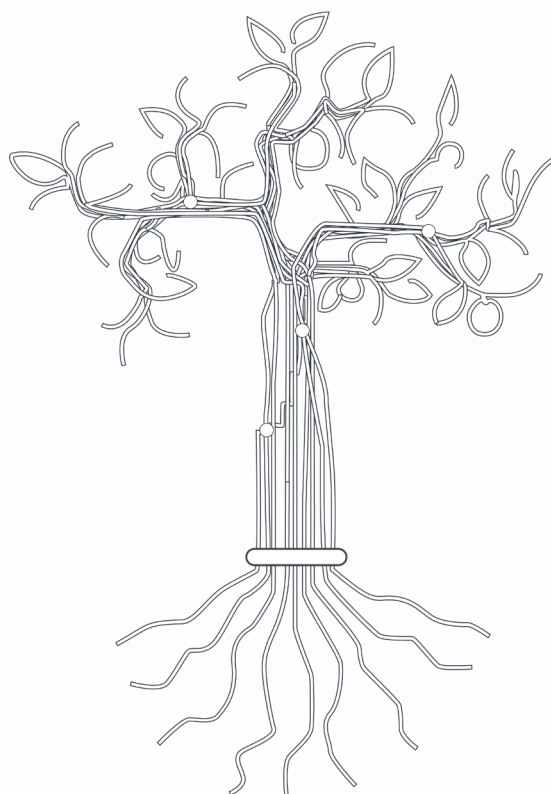
He who pays, says

Foreword by Mariette Kotzé,
Industry Support Services
General Manager

Marketing rule 101 says the customer is always right and in almost every instance the customer dictates, whether your market is your packhouse, marketing agent, trader, importer, retailer or the end consumer.

This in general implies that producers of commodities and in this context pome and stone fruit have very limited control over the marketing environment. However, that being said, producers also tend to pass the responsibility of what happens to your fruit from farmgate to packhouses and the rest of the marketing chain. Having very little interaction and/or ownership throughout the process but taking all the risk in terms of the most important aspect of any business – the market! There is a saying that “the person controlling the market is the person controlling the business”. Rhetoric question then is who is actually paying and who should actually be saying?

The recent final report on the Fresh Produce Market inquiry released



mid-January 2025 by the Competition Commission focussing on fresh produce markets again specifically highlighted the complexities and ambiguities around market structures, fair and transparent pricing and barriers created by dominant players. This inquiry amongst others further highlighted other aspects of importance such as poor infrastructure at the National Fresh Produce Markets, lack of buyer networks, access to market information and the difficulty in meeting quality and safety standards. Although as an industry we can agree and live with many of the recommendations, the feasibility of the proposals clearly illustrate a misalignment with commercial realities in the marketing space.

Nevertheless understanding the marketing environment and marketing requirements is a crucial element of commercial fruit farming both from a strategic and operational point of view, influencing each and every decision from capital investment to operational decisions. This is even much more complex in export orientated industries than simply producing and selling and requires compliance with a whole range of legal and regulatory aspects. Hence also why access to markets is regarded as a barrier to entry for any new and/or first generation farmer and/or business owner, necessitating the emphasis on market access and access to markets from national government departments and agencies, commodity organisations and other public and private entities and role-players.

So does the market discriminate? For sure it does! Not on race, but on compliance with market requirements, on quality, variety, preferences and volume to be able to service your market of choice.

The only way to genuinely perform under commercial principles is the ability to compete fairly on all of the above. Marketing rules are the same for everyone and the focus should not be to lower the standards but to bring all up to standard. Similarly there are many business support programmes aimed at addressing these gaps but it remains the responsibility of the farmer or business owner to get acquainted with these requirements. Because he who pays, should say!



Bridging transformation and global markets:

Reflections from Fruit Logistica 2025



Walking into Fruit Logistica in Berlin, Germany on 5 February, Cynthia Mahlali reminded herself to take as much as possible in and use the opportunity to help understand global markets.

With over 2 500 exhibitors under one roof, representing every aspect of the fresh produce industry, from production and agri-tech to logistics and sustainability, it was clear that this was more than just an exhibition; it was a global marketplace in action.

Once I stepped back from the initial overwhelm, my objective became clear: to identify opportunities that could drive transformation and open meaningful market access for emerging producers. I was determined to engage with industry leaders, explore partnerships, and gain insights that could help position our emerging growers more competitively.

I first took a moment to reflect on what transformation means in our context. In South Africa, transformation is a core priority, driven by policy, funding mechanisms, and industry efforts to redress historical imbalances. However, on the global stage, the conversation is different.

International markets operate on the principles of supply, demand, quality, and consistency not necessarily on the origins of production. The reality is that, to buyers, an apple is red, green, or class 1 or 2. It is not a black-produced apple or a white-produced apple.

This realisation reinforced the need to align transformation efforts with market realities. If we want emerging producers to compete, it's not just about inclusion it's about ensuring they have the scale, efficiency, and market readiness to succeed.

Beyond the Fruit Logistica event, I had the opportunity to visit the Netherlands with a group of emerging South African fruit producers on a study tour organised by the Western Cape Department of Agriculture. This was an eye-opening knowledge-sharing experience. One of the key highlights was our visit to Rotterdam Harbour, where we gained a deeper understanding of what happens once South African fruit reaches European shores. We also visited packhouses, storage facilities, exporters, and farms, which gave us a holistic view of how the entire value chain operates beyond our borders.

A striking observation was the high level of integration among relatively medium sized Dutch farmers. Unlike in SA without over-generalising, where many producers primarily focus on growing fruit, farmers in the Netherlands are actively involved in packing, exporting, and logistics. This gives them greater control over pricing, quality, and market access.

Automation was another key differentiator. From sorting to packing, we saw

how advanced technology improves efficiency, quality control, and traceability. In South Africa, mechanisation is often limited due to high costs, making labour-intensive methods the norm. Yet, in the Netherlands, labour presented a different challenge where farmers struggle with labour shortages and high wage costs. This highlighted the delicate balance between mechanisation and employment opportunities that we must carefully navigate in South Africa.

One recurring theme throughout was trust is a critical factor in strengthening long-term trade relationships. In European markets, credibility and consistency seemed to determine access and growth opportunities. For South African producers, this means that beyond compliance with market standards, we must build and maintain reliable, long-term supply chains that builds confidence among buyers.

A key takeaway from Fruit Logistica was the role of trust and long-term relationships in global trade. Buyers prioritise consistency not just in quality, but in volume and supply reliability. This raises an important question: How do we position emerging producers to fully leverage global market opportunities?

One solution may lie in aggregation. Emerging producers often operate in silos, limiting their ability to negotiate better prices, meet export volumes, and compete at scale. Collaborations through structured value chain partnerships can help build the critical mass needed to strengthen market access. Accessing global markets

requires cold storage, efficient transport, and risk mitigation strategies; areas where smaller businesses struggle due to resource constraints. The “missing middle” in South Africa’s agricultural financing environment remains a significant challenge. Many producers are too large for small-scale grants but too small for commercial funding, making it difficult to scale operations effectively. Addressing these financing gaps is essential if we are to move from land

ownership to sustainable participation in global trade.

Both Fruit Logistica and the Netherlands study tour reaffirmed that opportunities exist but they require readiness, strategy, and scale. Attending global platforms is not enough. We must enter these spaces with clear objectives, concrete action plans, and structures that support emerging producers beyond the event itself.

The key question remains: How do we, as an industry, maximise opportunities like Fruit Logistica to ensure that South Africa’s emerging producers don’t just attend it, but get to participate and grow in global markets?



Advice for future farmers

In this new regular column *New Roots* asks established commercial farmers and producers all along the value chain for some pearls of wisdom on how to get going and go all the way in agriculture. For starters we asked Johnny Karolus, general manager at Disselfontein in the Koue-Bokkeveld for his pointers.

It all started in March 1992 when Johnny was appointed as a general worker on Donkerbos. It was evident that here is someone to take note of. He quickly progressed to tractor

driver, pest control foreman in the vegetable division before becoming the loadmaster in the vegetable packhouse. From there into fruit irrigation. In 2004 he became fruit production manager. In 2014 the two farms Donkerbos and Disselfontein became the first PALS (Partners in Agri Land Solutions) project and in 2018 Johnny was appointed farm manager of Disselfontein. With an industry survey done in 2023, the farm was, in terms of net farming income per hectare, one of the Top 10 apple producers in the district. Johnny is a well established commercial farmer, sharing here some undeniable truths about making it happen.



Opportunities in agriculture are endless. Whether in production, marketing, packaging, and research to name a few, you must search for your specialty.

Most importantly, you must want to do it. With passion.

Theory alone does not make you a farmer; get your hands dirty to get the experience. Don't be a spectator.

Remember, the product is always bigger than the individual. Never be bigger than the job.

You might be producing food, but you're working with people. Agriculture is a team sport.

Never be too clever to ask.

Lead through doing.

Take hard work, dedication, thinking out of the box, and balance it with knowing the basics.

When going into production, remember the product determines your time. Agriculture is never an eight to five job.

Be part of organised agri. That's where you learn.

Don't go it alone, make use of support systems.

**Good luck and go for it,
we need new blood in agriculture.
We need the future.**



Technical Roots

Watch out for these unwanted pests

Did you know that without proper monitoring and surveillance, unwanted pests may sneak into your orchards and cause havoc?

Some, like the spotted wing Drosophila (SWD) and polyphagous shot-hole borer (PSHB), can do damage that is only noted when it's too late.

Hortgro Science, in collaboration with the FruitFly Africa Centre of Excellence for Monitoring, is conducting surveillance and monitoring for polyphagous shot-hole borer (PSHB) and spotted wing drosophila (SWD) in the main deciduous fruit production areas of South Africa.

SWD



PSHB



Read more about the new centre here:



Additional information about SWD and PSHB monitoring here:



Hortgro Science has a handy PSHB website with loads of information. Visit it here:



If you want to learn how to make your own SWD traps, our experts compiled several DIY videos. Find the playlist here:



For more information on monitoring and management of SWD see the SWD Fact Sheet and Best Practice Guidelines here:



Hortgro Science also recently launched two novel platforms. The Hortgro Science Research Library and the Hortgro Science Climate Change app.
Find them here:

Research Library



Climate Change



Events

To stay ahead of the pack, you need to keep up with the latest research and technology. In June two major events to diarise are:

Hortgro Science Research Showcase at the Lord Charles Hotel, Somerset West.

The Pome Fruit Research Showcase,
3 June.

Stone Fruit Research Showcase,
4 June

And the biennial Hortgro Post-harvest Symposium on 5 June at the same venue.

Find more information, programmes and registration options on the following pages:

Hortgro Science Research Showcase

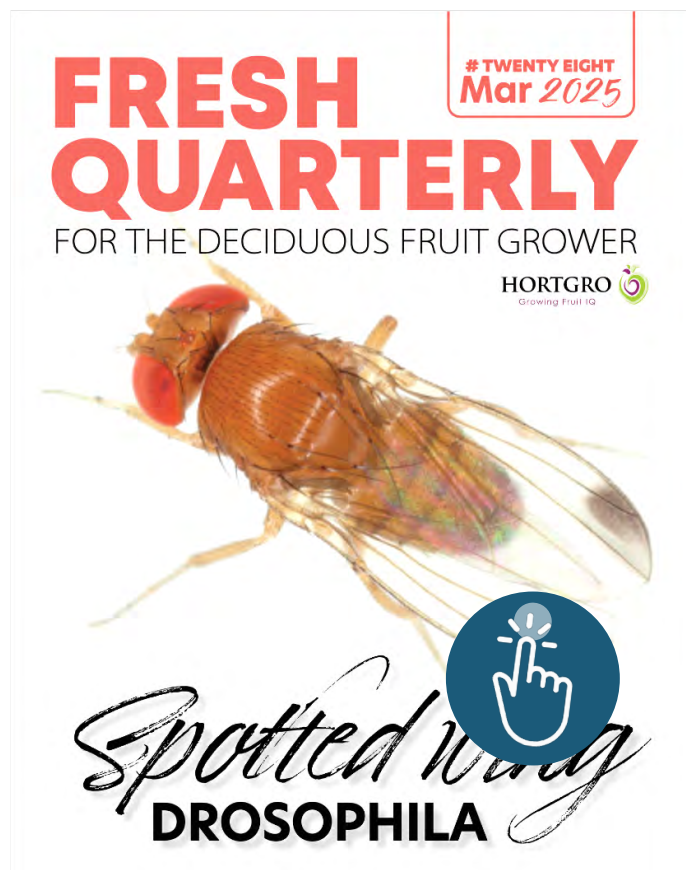


Post-harvest Symposium



Publications:

Don't have time to attend an event? We've got you covered. The free, online technical publication, *Fresh Quarterly*, is our flagship tech-transfer vehicle. If you are looking for specific information use the search function to find relevant information. Easy-peasy. Read it here:



In short, get yourself knowledgeable and get those borers and other bugs before they get your fruit.

From Wellington via Italy to Kromco

Maréze Smit is a great example of how Hortgro invests in human capital to ensure a better future for deciduous fruit in South Africa. But making it happen is also about being in the right place at the right time.

Maréze was surrounded by stone fruit right from birth on two farms near Wellington. At the age of 16 her dad started doing more and more consulting for other farmers and they moved into town. At the same time she had to complete a life orientation project about career choices. Who better to ask than Dad? So he told her about horticulture and commercial fruit cultivation. And she thought that sounded extremely boring and she opted to enrol in conservation ecology. She applied for, and was awarded a Hortgro bursary.



“For some reason I then decided not to begin with conservation ecology and switched to horticulture. I don’t know why. But studying it and by doing holiday work in the field, I fell in love with it,” she says.

After obtaining her degree she did a two year project with an additional Hortgro bursary at Provar in Paarl on cultivar profitability focusing on apples and plums which culminated in her Masters. Yet, being hungry for knowledge, inquisitive and eager to learn, she decided to spread her wings a bit and go and look how the world out there farms fruit. Prof Karen Theron from SU gave her an extensive list of research institutions all over the world and Maréze started applying.

“Most of the people I contacted in Germany, Holland, Switzerland, all over, were decent and saying the idea sounds interesting, a bit like don’t call us, we’ll call you, you know. However, when I emailed Laimburg research facility in South Tyrol, they responded quickly, saying it is a great idea, come and join us. Instinctively I knew I had to.”

It is the best thing that could have happened to her as Laimburg is an über-excellent research facility and farm, and South Tyrol is a unique place. Almost like not part of the rest of the world. It’s beautiful, it’s clean, it’s kind of not real. A bit like something in a Heidi

movie. South Tyrol is part of Italy today, but it used to be part of Austria until after Word War One. Today it is almost a little country on its own, with its own tax system and regulations. The *linguae franca* is a very specific kind of German dialect, spiced with Italian.

Fruit farming in South Tyrol is different, but next level. The farms are small, mostly 2,5 ha a piece, but with 300 days of sunshine on average per year, extremely profitable.

Its location between the colder alpine and warmer Mediterranean climates allow for high-quality apples to be grown at higher altitude where they mature slower, making them denser, crisper, and more compact. Big temperature swings between day and night result in great colours. Six billion apples are produced annually in South Tyrol, mostly by extremely profitable family-run farms resorting under the conventional co-op system and with government support.

Asking her how she ended up from South Tyrol as a horticulturist at Kromco in Elgin, she laughs and tells you they came and fetched her. What really happened was, about three months before the end of her internship, a group of Kromco producers, lead by technical manager Angelique Pretorius, visited Laimburg. At that stage Maréze was

beginning to realise it's time to start looking for a job back in South Africa, but has not done anything yet.

"So Angelique asked me what's in store for my future and I said I'm going back to my country that I love so much. I knew I can get work back home. Angelique agreed by telling me there is a position for a horticulturist at Kromco. I should apply she said. I did. Here I am. If I didn't choose South Tyrol, and if Kromco didn't visit same South Tyrol, it would not have happened. Serendipity," she adds with a smile. Yet, somehow, if your mind-set is right, you make your own luck.

If you wonder what makes her better equipped to an organisation like Kromco, she would not hesitate to tell you that her exposure to the farming com-

munity in South Tyrol taught her a lot more about work ethics. If, for instance fire blight is discovered on one tree, everybody, but everybody from the vice-director of the institute, to the last worker gets involved, inspecting every tree on the whole 60 ha farm where Laimburg operates. Nobody backs out.

And the future? "I did my M in profitability, but if I have to choose between my own profitability and helping a farmer to be more profitable, there is no choice. Our industry has a lot of brilliant people in the total value chain, but the farmer is the only one offering value creation. You cannot add value to something that does not exist. I want to do whatever I can to support our farmers. All our farmers and future farmers."

Welcome home, Maréze.

Learning and Development

– Invest in your people

Investing in skills development is a life-long investment. Through education and training we create opportunities for individuals and businesses to grow, to improve social conditions, lift employee moral and have a more productive and efficient workforce.

As a learning organisation we continuously strive to invest in programmes that enable us to address gaps within our industry and equip agri-workers with skills and abilities to enhance their overall development.

Our programmes include Leadership Development for production managers focusing on the individuals' strengths and development areas. Co-Hort 9 is planned during the winter season with an intake of 15 participants.

A supervisory/team leader workshop with a different approach as to classroom learning is being developed to make the transition from being a team member to managing a team easier. This proves to be a very difficult transition and often team leaders are not prepared. The aim of this course will be to build an effective team by motivating and valuing the individual team member and the team; to learn how to be assertive and lead the team, to build expertise by teaching others and to take accountability.

The industry leadership programme, with 23 participants, which aims to develop and expose young leaders to the industry and its structures, is in its second year of the programme focusing on trade, market access and logistics, with site visits planned to the local market and the harbour during 2025.

The Hortgro Intern and Mentorship Programme currently has 35 interns placed at various host employers. With funds augmented through the Hortgro Jobs Fund Accelerator Programme, Hortgro is able to assist these learners with stipends, travel and/or rental allowances which in many cases is a major concern for students having to move to rural areas to complete their internships.

Health and safety training programmes in the different regions are continuing and since inception in November 2022, more than 300 participants have been trained on First Aid Level 1, Health and Safety Officer and Safety Committee training.



Keep an eye on our socials or contact learn@hortgro.co.za for more information.

Ten questions to Jason Baartman

This is the column where we find out more about our peers in the deciduous fruit industry. What make them tick? Our first player is Jason Baartman, a nurseryman, production manager and a rapper.



In 2017 Jason completed his agri course at Boland College, did a practical year at Panorama Farms near Tulbagh, where after he discovered his future as a nurseryman at Laastedrif. In 2022 he did the Hortgro leadership course for production managers. Oh yes, and he was runner-up in Agri's Got Talent (AGT) in 2017.

What is the best thing that ever happened to you?

Without a doubt to have been part of Agri's Got Talent. It's still rolling on ...

What is the best advice you've ever received?

Go out there every day and learn and always, always give nothing but your best.

What is the best advice you've ever given?

Remember that today's barrier will become tomorrow's building block.

What motivates you?

Above all else my wife, and to see success in what I do.

Do you have a hero? If so, who and why?

Moses in the Bible. He led his people out of slavery and through the Red Sea. He was a real leader. That's what I want to do with my music. Be there for my people.

What would you have wanted to be different in your life?

I don't know really. I'm still young but so

far so good. Nothing really. I feel grateful, things are going right for me.

What was your favourite toy as a child?

We used to make wire carts and race with them. You know, those "karretjies" with flattened cool drink tins for wheels and you run with it, hanging on to a big wire steering wheel. And then also, top spinning was one of my favourites.

What is the best food in the world for you?

Oh, nothing better than a good biryani. Any day!

Do you have any regrets?

Well only really one. If I saved all my pocket money from the beginning, I think I could have owned my own house by now! But then, I did enjoy the privilege of being able to buy things like spinning tops too, you know.

What characteristic do you admire most in other people and why?

The workers on the farm working so hard. Come rain, come shine they persevere, grateful to have a job and be part of something.



STEP INTO THE
SPOTLIGHT, UNLOCK
YOUR POTENTIAL!



AGRI'S GOT TALENT 2025

AGT is a platform empowering agricultural workers in the fruit and wine industries to showcase their singing talents, develop life skills, and make a lasting impact on their communities.



**ENTER BY SENDING US A WHATSAPP ON
082 372 1577**

WWW.AGRISGOTTALENT.COM