HORTGRO Science Technical Symposium 2016

Hortgro Science proudly invites you to 2016’s annual technical symposium, which will be held at Allée Bleue, Simondium, from 30 May to 3 June 2016.

This year, we have the addition of a first ever New Entrants Day on 30 May at the same venue, with helpful talks and presentations to farmers who are new to the industry. There will also be a Post-harvest Day and a Field Day, on which delegates will visit various farms to see demonstrations of the latest technologies and speakers will explain the how and why behind their methods.

South African agriculture is in the grip of a serious drought. Therefore, improving water productivity in irrigated agriculture is on everyone’s lips. Whether we’re talking about the weather, water, the workforce, technology, the consumer or the Rand, fruit production is subject to and fruit producers, seemingly, at the mercy of change. But while change can certainly make fruit farming more challenging, it can also provide opportunities, for those who are mindful of future scenarios. With this reality in mind, Horticogro Science has designed this year’s symposium to address the major changes that present challenges and opportunities to future fruit production.

Political analyst Max du Preez will open the symposium with his thoughts on challenges facing agriculture in South Africa — a political and economic “weather prediction”. While fruit producers have little recourse against the winds of change and the stormy water in which the South African economy finds itself, it is important to be aware of how these changes may affect them. On farm level, one of the more difficult decision challenges fruit growers face is that of what to plant. There is a bewildering array of new cultivars, the most to be discovered only after planting to be dismal and costly failures.

Hortgro Science crop production programme manager and Associate Professor Wiehann Steyn is a specialist on plant-climate interactions, fruit pigmentation, orchard mechanisation and consumer preference for apple and pear taste and appearance. He will take the local context of the subject further, discussing the effects of different ethnicities, age groups, genders and socio-economic backgrounds on consumer preference for apple-eating quality. The resulting implications will provide useful indicators for the industry.

Internal browning on Fuji and other apple cultivars proved to be a major headache in recent times – this and other post-harvest issues will be addressed in our Post-harvest Symposium Day. International postharvest plant physiology expert, Dr Michael Reid from UCDavis, University of California, will be sharing his insights on internal browning and innovative production and postharvest technologies for horticultural producers in the developing world.
Dr Walter Guerra heads the Pomology (Fruit Cultivation) Department at the Laimburg Research Centre for Agriculture and Forestry in South Tyrol, Italy. The department operates an apple evaluation centre that assesses new cultivars from around the world for their suitability to conditions in South Tyrol. Dr Guerra will lead two presentations at the symposium which may provide fruit producers with pointers on how to make sense of the cultivar conundrum.

The 2015/16 growing season has been challenging for most deciduous fruit farmers due to the adverse effects of the unrelenting heat and water scarcity on fruit quality and tree health. Is a drier and warmer Western Cape our future? And what are the implications for fruit farming? Also, how do we adapt to climate change? It is of key importance that climate change and water will be central themes at this year’s symposium.

Prof Elias Fereres from Cordoba University in Spain is a world expert on fruit tree irrigation in water scarce conditions and the technology that can be used to make every drop count. He will also discuss whether we have reached our water productivity limits.

The crop production research programme at Hortgro Science focuses on the risks to the “orchard of the future”. Of these risks, water availability is certainly one of the most important. While certainly being of interest to growers, we believe that Prof Fereres’s address on water preservation strategy and technology is critically important to a sustainable future.

As part of this same drive, Prof Roland Schulze, hydrologist at UKZN and voted top water researcher in South Africa in a national survey, will elaborate on climate change predictions for South Africa and how these changes may affect crop suitability in different regions.

Associate Professor at the Horticulture Department of Stellenbosch University, Stephanie Midgley, will subsequently bring the focus closer to home and zero in on adaptations that will be required in our deciduous fruit production regions. Presentations will also be delivered on water policy and catchment area management.

Realising that the presentations that make up the bulk of our symposium don’t allow us to showcase the ground breaking research conducted for Hortgro Science, we have decided to try something new at the 2016 symposium. After each session, except for the plenary sessions, three researchers will each present a “power presentation” on one of their most relevant research projects. The researchers will be available in the exhibition tent during the break after the session to answer any questions that members of the audience might have.

Be sure to diarise this event! Online registrations will open on 15 March.