

RSA grapefruit on the up

The South African grapefruit sector appears to be emerging from the doldrums of the first decade of this century

After languishing in the doldrums prior to 2012, the last five years have been good for the South African grapefruit industry. That's according to the South African Citrus Growers' Association, which reports that while grapefruit growers say the product still owes them something for the difficulties experienced before 2012, the turnaround bodes well for the future.

Renewed interest in the category is reflected by higher demand for grapefruit buds from the Citrus Foundation Black (CFB), and higher demand for nursery trees.

After a low volume 2016 season, exports returned to 2015 levels during the past season, with a similar market distribution.

"The markets have reached some level of equilibrium," said the CGA. "The EU is the biggest importer with 41 per cent (5.5m cartons); followed by Asia with 23 per cent, with Japan leading the way with 3.1m cartons.

"South East Asia [including China] is now receiving just under 2m cartons (14 per cent), while Russia is the destination for just over 1m cartons, which accounts for 8 per cent of shipments.

"Smaller volumes have been supplied to the UK and North America. Shipments to the Middle East represented 3 per cent of total exports."

The CGA said the resurgence has not happened by chance. Grapefruit growers, under the guidance of the Grapefruit Focus Group, have been diligent in monitoring data for grapefruit packed and shipped, passing information to growers to ensure informed decisions are made.

"Obviously, growers will continue to concentrate on the fresh export and local market sectors, as processed returns continue to disappoint," said CGA.

"The 2005 season will be one long remembered by grapefruit exporters. A huge spike in supply coupled with poor and sometimes negative returns cast its shadow over subsequent seasons. Only in 2013 did volumes return to similar levels, while those with alternative crop options exited the sector."

The CGA figures show that whilst in 2002 the grapefruit sector only earned R2,000 per tonne, this rose to R8,000 per tonne in 2016. In 2005 production reached 250,000 tonnes, but by 2015 it had declined to just over 200,000 tonnes.

The area planted to grapefruit covered more than 9,000ha in 2010, but by 2015 had declined to around 7,800ha.

