

# 'Our citrus is the best in the world'

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By Arjan van Oorsterhout

In a move that represented hope, development and partnership, 38 members of a company that has farmworkers as shareholders celebrated the picking of their first significant crop of citrus fruit.

Cedar Citrus was established four years ago as a partnership between ALG Boerdery in Citrusdal and farmworkers who have been working for the company.

The new crop is special because it is the first major crop since the enterprise was started.

"Our citrus is the best in the world," said Tiekie September, 45, at Wednesday's celebrations.

She emphasised the word "our" to underline that she, as a shareholder, is one of the owners of the company, something her parents could only dream of.

September's ancestors used to work for ALG Boerdery too.

"I'm actually a member of the fourth generation. I grew up among these trees.

"But now we have really made a big step forward. Cedar Citrus has changed workers' views of citrus farming and we are all excited about the opportunities we have to grow and export our fruit."

The workers' families gathered on Wednesday for the blessing of the crop by clergyman Daniel van Zyl.

They then ceremonially picked the first bin of fruit and celebrated their Fair Trade Certification, which will allow them to market their fruit under the Fair Trade Brand in the United Kingdom.

Though visibly delighted, September regretted that Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu wasn't able to join the celebration.

But he sent a message to all the shareholders. "This is wonderful," he wrote. "I pray that God will bless the citrus orchards of Citrusdal with an abundant harvest of the finest fruit, both as a blessing and a reward for the years of hard work and love with which you have tended them."

September is the only woman among the shareholders of Cedar Citrus. Along with another worker, Dirk Dirks, and the owners of ALG Boerdery, Gerrit and Alwin van der Merwe, she's also a member of the management of the company.

The Van der Merwe brothers started the idea of Cedar Citrus in 1996. The first trees were planted in 2000.

"We wanted to do something to improve the position of our workers, to make them share," said Alwin van der Merwe.

"If you don't share in this country, you will have problems in the future."

Van der Merwe believes in black economic empowerment: "It's a good thing, but I think you have to help the people for the first period. There are examples of projects that don't survive because there is a lack of knowledge.

"That's why we are assisting our workers to develop their nursery skills, for example."

Van der Merwe said the workers-shareholders, who now own 50 percent of the company, are expected to take full ownership of Cedar Citrus as soon as it becomes a profitable concern.

That isn't the case yet, because only the trees of nine of the 36 hectares are mature enough to bear fruit.

