

REMEMBERING DR RICHARD HENSZ

father of the Star Ruby grapefruit

The world's citricultural community lost a significant innovator on 15 May this year with the death of Dr Richard Hensz, just one year after the passing of Betsy, his wife of 67 years. By John da Graça (Center Director Emeritus, Texas A&M University-Kingsville) and Tim Grout (Citrus Research International)

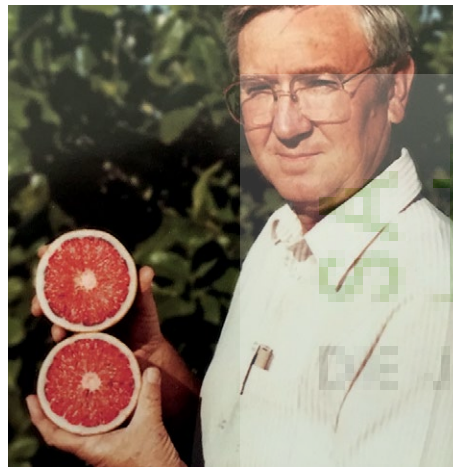


Dr Hensz is best known for his contributions to grapefruit breeding, with his two highly successful dark-red grapefruit cultivars, Star Ruby and Rio Red, gifts to citrus growers and consumers.

Hensz was born in Evansville, Indiana USA in July 1929. After graduating high school in 1947, he moved to the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) in Texas to farm citrus and vegetables. Later, he studied at Texas A&M University (now Texas A&M University-Kingsville), obtaining a BSc degree in plant science, after which he served in the US Air Force stationed in Libya. He then returned to Texas A&M University-Kingsville, completing a master's degree in horticulture in 1958, and returned to the LRGV to assume a position at the Texas A&I University-Kingsville Citrus Center in Weslaco. In 1962, he took leave to attend the University of Florida where he completed his PhD in 1964. Hensz returned to the Citrus Center and was appointed as Center Director, replacing Dr Paul Rohrbach who died unexpectedly at the end of 1963.

In addition to his work in Texas, he also received international recognition, spending 18 months in 1975/6 in Valencia, Spain, assisting in the establishment of a research centre, and later an assignment in Sudan in 1977/8. Hensz also attended international citriculture conferences and visited Japan and SA.

At the time of his appointment in Texas, the major grapefruit cultivar grown was the Ruby Red. While popular, there were industry



Dr Richard Hensz (Texas A&M University-Kingsville)

concerns regarding the pale colour of this fruit. Hensz decided to try and develop a darker, commercially acceptable cultivar. So, in 1959 he collected seed from the dark red seedy Hudson grapefruit and had it subjected to gamma-irradiation, a technique known to reduce seediness. The result of this work was the selection of the Star Ruby, released in 1970. Although a patent was issued in 1972, it was never applied. While this cultivar became highly successful in other citrus growing regions, including SA, it experienced some problems in Texas with regard to irregular bearing characteristics, in addition to Phytophthora infections and herbicide sensitivity. The selections used in SA and Australia were derived from Star Ruby seed and appear to be more reliable fruit bearers. Hensz continued researching grapefruit breeding and subjected Ruby Red budwood to irradiation, which led to the selection of a darker grapefruit (A&I 1-48), one tree of which

produced a budsport he thought was suitable for commercialisation – this selection was named Rio Red and was released in 1984.

The South African Cooperative Citrus Exchange imported seeds of Star Ruby from Texas in 1972 and the seedlings were raised at nurseries near Malalane in Mpumalanga and Addo in the Eastern Cape. Trees from these seedlings grafted onto rough lemon and Troyer citrange were planted out near Malalane and Nkwilini in KwaZulu-Natal in 1975. In 1980, trees from the Eastern Cape seedlings were made on Troyer citrange rootstock and were evaluated at sites in Limpopo, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal and Eswatini. Fruit from all these experimental trees were evaluated between 1980 and 1986 in order to identify the best trees for future budwood. The internal quality of fruit from trees with Troyer citrange rootstocks was superior and some trees were less susceptible to the Citrus tristeza virus. During this period commercial plantings were initiated and by 1986 there were 214 349 trees in SA and Eswatini. In 2021, 235 844 tons of Star Ruby fruit were exported from Southern Africa.

During his tenure Texas suffered two major freezes in 1983 and 1989. Orchard re-establishment began in earnest after these events, and growers switched from Ruby Red to Rio Red. And this remains the major grapefruit cultivar in Texas.

Hensz retired from the university in 1994 and concentrated on his own farm in the LRGV. A few years later, he sold the farm and moved to Kerrville in central Texas. His last visit to the Citrus Center in Weslaco was in 2010, to attend the dedication of a new building. 🍷



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