

CENTENARY OF THE Nartia Marsh grapefruit trees

Centenarian milestone in citrus makes for unexpected discoveries. Louise Brodie and Irma Rasper report

As the South African citrus industry prepares to celebrate the centenary of the South African Cooperative Citrus Exchange, established in 1926, another quieter centenary is being marked in a corner of a Farm in Wellington's district. There, three Marsh grapefruit trees have also reached the remarkable age of 100 years. Planted in 1926, these trees have survived in situ for a full century and continue to carry a story of unusual significance for the South African citrus industry.

Irma Rasper of Citrus Research International (CRI) recently visited the trees, accompanied by Professor Hano Maree of Stellenbosch University and CRI. Their visit highlighted the remarkable history of these old Marsh grapefruit trees and their importance in SA's citrus plant improvement work.

The exact origin of the Nartia (A Marsh grapefruit selection) trees remains obscure. They have traditionally been associated with budwood believed to have been imported into SA from California by Piet Cillié. A Wellington fruit pioneer, Cillié also became known as "Piet California". However, while this connection is plausible, it remains a historical association rather than a fully documented fact.

The records state that the trees were already known to the citrus industry by the 1950s. Industry archives show that an extension officer of the South African



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Cooperative Citrus Exchange in the Western Cape reported the existence of these Marsh grapefruit trees. At the time, they were estimated to be approximately 30 years old and were described as performing well and being virtually free of stem pitting.

This observation would later prove significant. In 1972, the three trees, identified as Nartia A, Nartia B and Nartia C, were selected as budwood sources for the interim Citrus Improvement Programme, now the Citrus Improvement Scheme. They were found to be free of citrus viroids, apple stem grooving virus, citrus psorosis virus and Impetratura disease. Samples were taken again during the 1980s and '90s. These samples were established in a glasshouse at the Agricultural Research Council (first collection) and CRI (second collection) – both in Nelspruit – headquarters for citrus tristeza virus evaluations.

Thus, the old Nartia trees became part of a much wider story of plant health, budwood selection and citrus improvement in SA.

During her inspection, Irma found that the trees are still growing, despite receiving no irrigation or fertiliser. The largest and strongest of the three remains healthy, with shiny, deep-green leaves and still bears fruit every year. This tree has a plate attached to it, though the writing is no longer legible.

The other two trees are weaker, but still alive. One of them has fallen over, yet it continues to produce healthy new shoots. Their survival, with such limited care, adds to their value as living witnesses to a century of citrus history.

The farm owner and his children are aware of the significance of the trees. Each year, the family makes marmalade from the fruit of the strongest tree, continuing a simple but meaningful connection between the farm, the trees and their fruit.

These remarkable Marsh grapefruit trees have made an important contribution to the South African citrus industry. They have endured for 100 years, remained rooted in the place where they were planted,



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1. The healthiest and largest of the remaining trees 2. A sprouting branch on one of the trees with dieback 3. A considerably smaller tree among the remaining ones



Louise Brodie



Irma Rasper

and helped inform important citrus plant improvement work over several decades.

Irma recently had the opportunity to visit the trees again and to sample their fruit. The results were unexpected, as their taste is not typical of the usual Marsh grapefruit, which raises further questions about the origins of these remarkable trees. What remains clear, however, is that their continued survival is not only a horticultural curiosity. It is also a reminder that some of the most important stories in agriculture are still standing quietly in old orchards, waiting to be recognised.

Note that these trees are planted on private property and are not accessible to the public.

Any person who wants to visit the trees can contact Irma Rasper at irma@cri.co.za.

