The CGA recognised the skills shortage in the industry as a threat that had to be dealt with and established the Citrus Academy earlier this year. The Academy is funded by the development levy paid by the growers, which is to be applied to transformation and skills development in the industry.

At the head of the academy stands Jacomien de Klerk, who has years of experience in skills development and capacity building programmes and a lot of enthusiasm for the tasks at hand.

The primary objective of the Academy is to enable and facilitate access for all participants in the citrus industry to relevant, quality skills development services.

"The Academy is funded by growers at this time, and therefore our efforts are focussed mostly on growers, their workers and pack houses. This includes all growers, being commercial (export and non-export) and emergent growers. The Academy will eventually extend its work to more directly benefit upstream and downstream suppliers as well, providing that the funding base is broadened accordingly."

The Academy was established to enable and facilitate access to skills development, the implication being that the Academy is not and will not be a delivery mechanism, i.e. it does not train people. It has the task of creating the enabling environment required for skills development to take place in a sustainable, meaningful manner, in the process enabling service providers to deliver skills development effectively.

From its primary objective, the tasks of the Academy can be defined more clearly:

- The development of citrus specific learning material that can be used for citrus specific production training for a wide range of target groups, has been prioritised. The lack of quality learning material has long been a limiting factor in skills development, and the Academy has now undertaken a project to develop 59 sets of citrus specific learning material before the end of this year, involving the most highly qualified and experienced people in the industry. The development is based on registered unit standards and is done according to the requirements of the South African Qualifications Authority. The material will be properly accredited and made available to service providers.

- The accreditation of service providers is also an essential task. The Academy will ensure that skills development is delivered on the ground by facilitators qualified to do so, monitor the activities of service providers, and control the quality of delivery.

- The Academy will also provide information to growers regarding service providers in their area, funding of skills development, and skills development programmes in which they or their employees can participate.

- Monitoring skills development funding and ensuring that sufficient funding is available for the tasks at hand is another task that the Academy will undertake.

In terms of courses, the Academy has identified around 40 skills areas (fields of study) that involves citrus production, farm management and pack houses. The learning material that the Academy is developing this year covers 17 of these skills areas, such as Fertilisation, Pests & Diseases, Marketing, Propagation, etc. Material for the remainder of the skills areas will either be sourced from others, specifically for non-citrus-specific areas such as tractor operation, maintenance of tools and equipment, etc., or developed at a later stage. The next round of development will most likely focus on packing and processing.

"With so much effort and funding going into capacity building at this time, it is easy to play the numbers game and to say that we train so many people and spend so much money. To me, what really matters is whether the learners gain knowledge and skills that they can build on in the future and that they can apply in their day-to-day activities to improve their farming practices and farming operations, ultimately benefiting the citrus industry," says Jacomien.

For more information contact Jacomien at the Citrus Academy on tel: (031) 208-8960 or cell: 082-496-5510.

"If I had to say what one ingredient I must have in the kitchen, it would be the lemon because the flavor, both assertive and enhancing, is like liquid sunshine going into the food."

FRANCES MAYES