

Black and orange; [the Sam Motsuenyane Project]

By Shannon Sherry

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Black farmers in the Winterveldt area of northern Gauteng are reaping a sweet harvest from the bitter legacy of the past. A promising citrus farming project has been started on plots bought from government in the 1940s in what was to become apartheid's Bophuthatswana homeland.

Because of poverty and lack of resources, many of the plots were abandoned or under used.

When former African Bank chairman and SA diplomat Sam Motsuenyane returned to the area in 2000 to retire, he found farms turning into squatter camps or overgrown with bush.

"There are 1 658 plots in the Winterveldt. About two-thirds of them are of five morgen (about 41 ha) and the rest measure 10 morgen (82 ha). About half of the five-morgen plots were already congested with urban squatters," says Motsuenyane. "I called a meeting at my house where I encouraged the farmers to look to commercial agriculture to lift themselves out of poverty and the other social problems plaguing the region."

In 2002 the farmers launched the Winterveldt Citrus Project (WCP).

Motsuenyane canvassed private-sector support to buy orange trees and farmers were trained in how to care for them.

In 2005 their first harvest produced 3 t of Valencia oranges. A year later this almost quadrupled to 11 t. "We are hoping to more than double that tonnage this year," says Motsuenyane.

The fruit is sold to, among others, Pick 'n Pay stores in Soshanguve, under the brand name Bosele, meaning "new dawn".

So far the project has largely been aided by the Tshwane municipality. A grant from the North West department of agriculture, conservation & environment gave an added boost.

But the project has also been taken to the community for support. For example, a Muslim community school in Laudium encouraged each of its pupils to donate a tree. So far 145 plot owners have adopted Motsuenyane's citrus farming idea and formed the Winterveldt United Farmers' Association (Wufa).

Together with the private sector, Tshwane's economic development division and the department of agriculture, Wufa is represented on the WCP board and is the sole beneficiary of donor funds.

According to Motsuenyane, an orange tree takes three seasons to reach maturity and then produces about 10 bags of oranges every year for 30 years.

"Each tree will make about R140/year. To date about 43 000 trees have been planted and individuals who had nothing are now making a small income.

"Government and private-sector support for at least the next five years is critical; after that the farmers will be able to support themselves."

Among plans for the project is a packing house and processing plant to manage the packaging and distribution of citrus products, such as juices and jams, as well as the planting of a minimum of 100 000 citrus trees.

Motsuenyane insists agriculture should be a "great creator" of jobs. This includes processing. "In our country agriculture is looked down upon by black people who have been denied the opportunity to engage in commercial agriculture," he says. "We have to develop agriculture that creates jobs, not subsistence farming."

The recent cold weather harmed trees, but specialists say they will recover.

Valencia and navel oranges are the only crops planted so far but there are plans to plant naartjies and other fruit.

Farmers say they realise that to ensure sustainable development, the project will have to include diversification of activities such as crop and livestock production, development of peripheral and support businesses, skills development, educational facilities, and infrastructure development such as municipal services and roads.

Irrigation is also a problem that will become more acute as the project grows. "We are hoping to be able to source water from the Toloane (Sand) River," says Motsuenyane.

Rodney Morife (25), a graduate of the Taung Agricultural College and the son of a subsistence farmer, manages the citrus project. It is his first full-time job. "Every day is a learning day here. I want to share everything I learn with the members of this project.

"What drives me most is that I don't want to fail Dr Sam. He always encourages me, telling me to look after this project because it will benefit me."