

As another stone fruit season for the South African stone fruit industry draws to a close, it is a good time to reflect on the past season and to hold a in house post-mortem as to the performance of individual orchards, varieties etc.

If an orchard is to be profitable, it depends on the 3 P's namely:

- Production (Yield, expressed in tons per hectare)
- Pack-out (Percentage Class 1 Fruit and fruit of desired size)
- Price (not to be discussed in this article)

We as growers can determine the profitability of an orchard by improving yields (production) and pack-out.

At the end of the season, one should analyse the performance of each variety in each individual orchard as far as yield and pack-out is concerned.

The following is a short check list that is often used when analysing an orchard's performance to determine why it didn't perform as well as we hoped it would. It is good to analyse every one of these factors and see how much they contributed, if at all, to the lower than expected yields and lower than expected pack-outs.

## 1. Soil Factors

Probably one of the most limiting factors in the orchard's performance are soil factors and the following should be checked regarding the soils:

- ✓ **Drainage:** Is the drainage adequate in the orchard, does one have areas of wet feet, tree mortalities. 10% of the trees missing in an orchard mean 10% lower yield per hectare.

If drainage is a problem, you will need to make plans to rectify it.

- ✓ **Soil Compaction:** To check the soil compaction, seeing more and more heavily compacted soils with resultant poor root activity, water penetration etc.
- ✓ **Organic Contents of the Soils:** How much carbon do I have in the soils, aiming at 3% carbon, the closer that one can get to 3% carbon in the soils, the better the soil structure will be and the better nutrient uptake will be.
- ✓ **Chemical Balance in the Soils:** What does the soil analysis results say? What rectification do I need to make, if any.

- ✓ **Brak Conditions:** Many of our soils have too high a salt content and we need to do something to reduce the salt content. Trees cannot perform to maximum potential if the soil sodium content of the soils is above 2% or the Magnesium content of the soils are above 12% of Cation Exchange Capacity.

## 2. Root Diseases and Insects

We are seeing more and more severe nematode infections in the orchards and do believe that if there is any doubt of nematode infection, sampling for nematodes is very worthwhile. Check for all other root diseases or insects.

## 3. Pollination

Lack of cross pollination is probably one of the biggest reasons for poor yields in plums, it is always interesting that where you have a Songold tree as a pollinator that is say every ninth tree, it has a full crop and where it is a main variety, you struggle to get a crop and the difference is out and out just cross pollination. I urge every plum farmer to make a detailed study of their cross pollination. The cross pollinizers that we have, are they compatible with the variety that we are trying to pollinize? See Hortgro Science's circular regarding Pollen Compatibility and secondly do they blossom at the same time.

## 4. Tree Vigour

Too much vigour in the tree can be just as harmful as too little vigour. If the tree is too vigorous, it will not produce fruit. It stays in a vegetative phase and does not produce flowers. If they have not enough vigour, you will not produce good quality new bearing wood, fill the space allocated to the tree etc. So too much vigour is harmful and too little vigour is just as harmful. Must get the tree into balance between vigour and fruiting.

## 5. Thinning

How successful was my thinning recipe this past season. Under thinning will result in small fruit size, too heavy a crop load which leads to alternate bearing and all the other problems. Over thinning will give one larger fruit but could result in excess vigour in the tree with resultant poor yields.

## 6. Irrigation

Have a critical look at your irrigation system. Did the irrigation system deliver water when it was required? How was my scheduling, was the irrigation a limiting factor with regard to yields.

## **7. Wind**

Wind Damage, how big a factor was it this past year. Do I need to look at artificial wind breaks, increasing the number of wind breaks planted etc. Good to analyse the wind situation on the farm.

## **8. Hail**

Was hail a factor limiting production? Do I need to take precaution against hail?

## **9. Summer Pruning**

Did my summer pruning practices help for fruit size, fruit quality, flower bud differentiation for next year? To take a critical look at the summer pruning practices and the timing of summer pruning.

## **10. Harvesting Practices**

Summarize harvesting practice. Did I pick at the correct maturity, picking out strategies, correct quality? Did any damage to the fruit occur during harvesting?

## **11. Light Management**

Are the trees open enough? Are all leaves receiving sufficient amount of light for photosynthesis etc.? Do I need to do some post-harvest light management, removing strong offensive branches, especially wrong ratio branches and excessively vigorous branches?

## **12. Weed Control**

How successful was the weed control strategy this past year, how successful was I controlling perennial weeds, especially kikuyu, tall flea bane, "fynkweek" etc., do I need to change my weed killing strategy.

## **13. Insect and Disease Control**

Frikkie van Schalkwyk always said, next season's insect and disease control is determined at the end of the past season because you know then what the problems were and what needs to be addressed re these problems for the next season. Insects such as mealybug control strategy, pernicious scale control strategy etc., are all determined post-harvest for the following season. The same as for disease control.

Many of the factors affecting yield etc., are influenced by having an adequate amount of flowers (adequate flower bud differentiation) and if we do have adequate number of strong flowers, how do we make sure that we have adequate fruit set (pollination, light management, tree reserves etc.) Spending some time analysing the past season and what were the limiting factors can help one greatly to improve yields and pack out for the coming year. It is well worth the exercise.

### TIMELY HINTS CONTRIBUTOR

#### Thinning and newly planted trees

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