

Patrick van Schetsen, Olympic Fruit:

"South African citrus season a tale of two halves"

The South African citrus season faced many challenges this year. "Even experienced suppliers are calling it the worst year ever. It was, in fact, a perfect storm," says Patrick van Schetsen of Olympic Fruit.



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Patrick van Schetsen

"For instance, there had already been a lot of rain in the spring, followed by a whirlwind, which in turn caused considerable damage to the peel. We also found that the fruit struggled to reach the desired Brix levels, and the flavour of the citrus varied considerably. In addition, there were many logistical problems throughout the season, and the ports, particularly in the north, were filled to the brim. At times, there were a few million boxes waiting to be shipped. For produce whose quality

isn't already top-notch, a delay of 1–2 weeks is obviously not ideal. There are still many problems at the ports. For example, bad weather last week delayed the entire operation, meaning a lot of produce is still left unsold."

"All in all, this led to a poor market situation, particularly for grapefruit and, to a lesser extent, oranges. Retail data shows that orange consumption was as much as 10–15 per cent lower than last year. The hot weather has undoubtedly played a part in this. When temperatures are high, consumers are more likely to opt for other products, such as melons. We also see that grapefruit, and to a lesser extent oranges, are mainly purchased by older consumers, a trend we have been observing in the retail data for a few years now."

European market flooded with lemons

"The lemon market also took a sharp downturn, but this was much more supply-driven. Record harvests, combined with the situation in the Middle East and Russia, meant that Europe was flooded with lemons in July. The season started with market prices of around 30–35 euros, which had growers seeing dollar signs, but it soon became clear that this was unsustainable. Ultimately, good-quality lemons were sold for 10–15 euros, while oversized and Grade II lemons quickly dropped below 10."

Mandarins are a positive exception in the citrus segment. "The clementine season was reasonable, but we are now seeing that the season for late varieties, such as Nadorcott, Orri, and Tango, is going really well. Hopefully, we'll be able to round off the season on a high note with the tail end of the late mandarin season. Two weeks ago, we saw a brief dip, but since last week, demand has picked up considerably," says Patrick.

"To be honest, I'd expected that upturn sooner. The mandarin season in South Africa will have finished in good time, and, as the early Spanish mandarins do not yet have the required shelf life, retailers are keen to extend the season with South African mandarins. The advantage is that varieties such as Nadorcott, Orri, and Tango sell themselves. In summer, there is traditionally a wide range of soft fruit and stone fruit available, which means citrus is less likely to be at the top of the shopping list. Now that the soft fruit and stone fruit season is drawing to a close and there are fewer alternatives, citrus sales are certainly set to get a boost."

Early end to the mandarin and hand-picked orange season

"Meanwhile, the Spanish mandarin season is about to start again. Spain is expecting a large harvest, but what could help them is that South Africa is expected to end its season early." The final batches of hand-picked oranges are already on their way, and I also expect Spain to get off to a reasonably good start

with mandarins. I think the market will have no choice but to use large juice oranges as hand-picked oranges. For lemons and juice oranges, the start will be a lot more uncertain, as these are still available in large quantities."

When asked about the key trends in the market, Patrick first mentions the increasing scale of international purchasing alliances. "That's all understandable given that costs are rising across the board. At the same time, the question is how quickly the market can adapt. The fruit and vegetable sector is, by its very nature, a market that must anticipate developments. Take El Niño, for example, with the coming year expected to bring heavy rainfall to South America and, conversely, drought to South Africa. As a specialist, you will need to take a leading role in staying one step ahead of problems. Although fortunately, there are still few public recalls, all these challenges mean that ensuring food safety is becoming an ever-greater challenge throughout the supply chain."



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Frontpage photo: © Olympic Fruit

Publication date: Thu 17 Sep 2026

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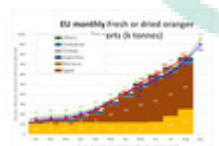
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