

# Ceres grower imports, cultivates Witlof roots to increase supply

Witlof, also known as Belgian endive, costs more to produce than many other leafy vegetables. On top of a two-stage growing process, one of the factors contributing to the higher unit price is that Witlof seeds need to be imported from the Netherlands and then yields poorly in South African soils - sometimes less than a third of the planted seeds produce roots that can be used for the second stage of Witlof production.



Fanie van der Merwe of Bronaar Farms in Ceres in the Western Cape, says: "Once the Witlof roots are harvested from the earth, they are frozen until required for the second growing stage, this time, entirely in the dark, hydroponically in a nutrient-rich water solution."

Van der Merwe explains that the reason why the Witlof leaf is a creamy white is that the sun hasn't developed the green-coloured chlorophyll that typically occurs during photosynthesis. Also, unlike many other leafy vegetables that are grown in soil, the Witlof chicon, the name for the head that grows from the root, is perfectly clean.

## Importing roots directly from the Netherlands

"Because of the low-yield of roots grown in South Africa we are now importing roots directly from the Netherlands and then growing the Witlof chicon in our R7m purpose-built hydroponic facility in Ceres," Van der Merwe explains, adding: "it takes three weeks from putting the root in the nutrient solution before the Witlof chicon is ready to harvest. This means we can accurately plan a calendar of supply to the supermarkets like Woolworths, Food Lover's Market, Checkers and others that carry our Witlof."

## Increasing supply

"In agricultural sales terms, the pack out is the number of items ready for sale from the volume planted. In Europe, the benchmark for Witlof pack outs is 80kg/m<sup>2</sup> and yet in our facility we are nearer to 50Kg/m<sup>2</sup>. The plan is to increase this percentage and, we believe that we will offset the costs of importing the roots via shipped refrigerated containers, to give us a higher pack-out and increased volume into stores," he says.

Although Witlof has been grown in South Africa before, and also imported as a finished product, Van der Merwe's facility is the first to be able to supply Witlof for 12 months of the year and already has a capacity for four times the current volume. "We are pleased about the increased demand, already proven in the few short months of our Witlof promotion campaign, and we look forward to meeting increased demand in the future," he says.

## Availability calendar for endive

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
											

Image Source: [Bronaar](#)

“We are excited about giving people all over South Africa the opportunity to enjoy versatile Witlof, as good raw as it is cooked, more often and to become familiar with this exceptional new low-carbohydrate vegetable (3.3g/100g) which is high in fibre (3.1g) and delivers 10% of the recommended daily intake of Folate (B9) along with a host of health-enhancing vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants,” ends Van der Merwe.

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