

Fruit-industry veteran scores an apple hat trick

Fruit-industry veteran Buks Nel is the man behind the discovery of three new apple strains (all in one year), each awarded Plant Breeder's Rights (PBR). A new variety specialist for Tru-Cape Fruit Marketing, such a find makes the company more competitive as it has rights to fruit few others can claim.

"The year 2011 was an annus mirabilis for mutations in my career, finding Bigbucks (the fruit of which is registered as Flash Gala), Fuji Royal, and Shortie in that year. Even more, I found both Trufu (alias Fuji Royal) and Shortie as shoot mutations in the same Fuji orchard on the same day! That day was Monday, 21 March 2011. Both had full red colour," Buks Nel explains.

To date, Bigbucks trees are the most planted variety in SAPO - the plant improvement organisation's - history. Almost a million Bigbucks trees have been ordered.

Spur-type variety

"What is interesting is that Shortie is a spur-type variety. In a spur-type, fruit grows on small thorn-like shoots (called spurs), which grow evenly along the main branches," Nel continues, explaining that he is currently experimenting with the optimal planting and pruning regime to produce the most efficient crop. "I hoped to eliminate alternate bearings in Fuji. To influence alternate bearing, I thinned Shortie trees to single fruit, twos and no thinning. So, we will see what sort of cropping we will get in these three treatments next year. There is one grower interested in planting about 6,000 trees at very close spacing next year."

Nel explains the process: "As I do with any mutation found, I grafted these shoots onto my variety block on Oak Valley Estate in Elgin that August. In 2012 they bore a few fruit and I could see that both these mutations were true, which means they look the same as original. As both Shortie and Trufu (now renamed Fuji Royal) had fruit with full red colour, I decided to continue with only one, Trufu. I continued to have lots of trees made of Trufu. Fortunately, I had about 20 trees of Shortie made too. When Shortie started to bear fruit, I saw that the trees were very much smaller than other Fujis and also noticed that it had very close internodes, bearing very heavy crops of fruit that were as red or even better coloured than Fuji Royal."

Holy grail of fruit industry

Tru-Cape managing director Roelf Pienaar says that in today's highly competitive environment, owning or having shared rights in club varieties - fruit that can only be planted if a royalty is paid - is the holy grail of the fruit industry. "Everyone in the fruit industry understands the significance of a find such as Buks' Flash Gala, and Tru-Cape recognises his immense contribution to the industry as a whole, but to Tru-Cape specifically. Tru-Cape, as custodian of these new varieties, is assured of its continued leadership position," Pienaar ends.