



New SU Chair

Theron rooted in SA's fruit orchards

Few things excite deciduous fruit expert Prof. Karen Theron as much as being busy in the orchard with practical trials. Or to look at a fruit tree and to be able to 'read' it, knowing just how to treat it to ensure the best possible yield. To be able to transfer this ability to her undergraduate and postgraduate students is another bonus of her job.

It is with these skills and motivations in place that Prof. Theron is tackling the next challenge in her career: as the first incumbent of the Chair in Applied Pre-harvest Deciduous Fruit Research at Stellenbosch University. The chair's operations focus on the pre-harvest side of the industry, and thus on what happens in the orchard.

The chair is funded by HORTGRO Science and the University. It is based in the SU Department of Horticultural Science, which is also home to Prof. Linus Opara's South African Research Chair in Post-harvest Technology.

According to Hugh Campbell, general manager of HORTGRO Science, the chair enhances the valuable liaison which already exists between the academic world and the industry. "Because horticultural science is the key discipline on which our fruit industry is based, it is necessary to constantly ensure that sufficient expertise is trained locally," he explains. "As a knowledgeable mentor, Prof. Theron is able to communicate research findings to the industry and to assist in the implementation thereof."

HORTGRO Science, the research dynamo of the South African deciduous fruit industry, already supports a variety of research posts at SU and has invested more than R15 million in student bursaries over the past ten years. HORTGRO Science initiates and leads research in the industry to meet the short and long term needs of fruit producers, with the purpose of improving international market access, fruit quality and sustainable farming practices.

"Much applied research is done in the SU Department of Horticultural Science on subjects which are relevant to the industry," Prof. Theron explains. "It means you must regularly get your boots dirty and go into the orchards to know what is happening and where attention is needed."

Together with her postgraduate students Prof. Theron does trials on among others pears, apples and stone fruit such as plums, nectarines and peaches. She works on the application of growth regulators as well as chemical and mechanical thinning of stone fruit and pome fruit. In addition she also does research on the pros and cons involved in using mechanisation options in the local deciduous fruit industry. These include harvesting systems, thinning machinery and platforms on which workers can stand while working.

HORTGRO Science hopes that Prof. Theron's new position will give her the opportunity to also get involved in strategic issues in the local industry, such as the quality and evaluation of plant material.

"Education is close to my heart, and besides the continued involvement with SU students, I would also like to assist with the training of people in the industry," Prof. Theron says. She is keen to be a mentor to young researchers and technicians who are still finding their feet in the deciduous fruit industry.

Prof. Theron's insight and knowledge are highly regarded by the industry – both locally and internationally. She enjoys membership of the International, American and South African societies for horticultural science, and is a member of the EUFERIN working group on fruit thinning. She serves as a member of the board of Citrus Research International, ASNAPP and is a board member of the South African Society for Horticultural Science. In addition, she is a member of the international scientific advisory committee of the 2014 International Horticultural Congress in Australia and the organiser of international congresses on pear production and planting systems which were held in Stellenbosch.

Prof. Theron has been associated with the SU Department of Horticultural Science since 1985, among others as departmental chair. She also served as acting dean of the Faculty of AgriSciences. She has already been involved with the training of around 60 MScAgric students, many of whom have gone on to make their mark in various South African fruit industries.

Caption: Mr Hugh Campbell, HORTGRO Science General Manager, Prof. Karen Theron, the first incumbent of the Chair in Applied Pre-harvest Deciduous Fruit Research, and Prof. Leopoldt van Huyssteen, acting rector at the University of Stellenbosch.

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