

Summer Citrus from South Africa is an industry collaboration that consolidates the marketing, logistics and sales efforts of the country's growers in the U.S. market. With the season recently having gotten underway, FreshFruitPortal.com spoke with the CEO Suhanra Conradie to hear about how the group is this year celebrating women in produce, the joys of being part of the global produce industry, and expectations for the 2020 citrus campaign amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.



Suhanra Conradie

FFP: How would you describe your experience working in the produce industry?

It's a fast-changing industry. We're not selling a dry commodity; we're selling fresh produce, and it's a very live and active commodity, so you need to be able to make changes very quickly.

I think that especially over the last couple of years, some trends have changed more drastically than others. And over the last couple of months, the whole global environment has changed.

FFP: This year Summer Citrus is celebrating women in produce - could you elaborate on that?

I like to add a little bit of marketing spice into everything. Last year we celebrated 20 years of success, and during this year's planning session I wanted to use this theme of celebrating women in produce.

The reality is that the fresh produce industry is still a fairly male dominant industry. And within our unique collaboration, women are certainly an imperative part of our success. They include Mayda Sotomayor the CEO of Seald Sweet, Erin Meder, General Manager of Capespan North America, and Megan Zweig, the Vice President of DMA Solutions.

I think there's a lot of strong continued messages that you see throughout everything that we do.

FFP: What would you say to women looking to get involved in the produce industry?

It's very much an industry that is built on relationships. I think there's a place for everyone that likes the fast pace of a changing industry. The fact that you work with fresh produce means that you're feeding the world, and I think that can make you feel part of something important. Especially now with the Covid-19 pandemic, all of a sudden Vitamin C has become more important in people's diets.

I think there are a lot of great people and you can learn a lot of skills. It's an industry that can really test your limits and that challenges the way you approach things - it can really help you grow as a person. In addition, you make wonderful friendships in this industry and it makes you feel good about the part that you play in the world. It's very satisfying to be part of the produce industry.

In this role I've met with lots of women globally who are in this industry but are not part of citrus - they may work with avocados, grapes, or the supply chain. It's really helped me to establish friendships across the globe, speaking with people in different time zones to address challenges and utilize opportunities cohesively. You make very nice friends with female colleagues across the globe.

FFP: Could you tell me about Summer Citrus' approach to exporting fruit to the U.S. market?

The approach to the U.S. from South Africa is very much about managing supply and demand. It's not just a push from growers, but support from the retail side as well, where over the last two months there has definitely been increased opportunity for citrus.

We don't want to compete with local production; we want to complement them when local production is not available. I think that we have built a very sustainable business in the U.S. with loyal retailers and importers, and strong relationships with service providers as well.

Our program is about the whole chain coming together and being involved in servicing that summer citrus import category into the United States.

FFP: What kind of planning goes into the program for each season?

Lots. South Africa is the second-largest exporter of citrus globally, so for growers the majority of their crop is being exported and there is a lot of strategy that is involved. Around 10 or 15 years back it was very different, but now there's a lot of planning and effort that goes into a program like this.

We normally have a pre-season planning session with U.S. retailers, importers, services

providers, and shipping companies, then we also have a logistics and marketing workshop where we discuss what the crop is looking like and what the demand is from the U.S. That's what determines our shipping program.

I also believe in efforts to increase demand. I always call it 'selling a country with confidence' - such as in branding our products with Summer Citrus from South Africa, those kinds of things.

It's all about connecting all the dots and being adaptable.



Photo: Courtesy of Summer Citrus from South Africa

FFP: What market opportunities do you see for citrus this year in the U.S.?

There's an increased opportunity for oranges and easy peelers. Imported easy peelers have grown over the last couple of years into the U.S. - and actually across the globe - so that will definitely continue. I think there's an increased opportunity for oranges towards the end of June, July, August, and even into September.

FFP: Do you see any potential challenges stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic?

I do - I think that one has to be realistic. Nobody was able to predict the world pandemic, so I'm sure there will be some challenges that the supply chain is going to be facing.

Logistics have been quite challenging up until now, but together with our partners we've really been able to shift the volumes that we had been expecting, which is great.

It's difficult in this challenging environment globally - not just in the industry - to predict exactly when or where we are going to run into some kind of challenge. We would have to manage them cohesively, as we have done with any other challenge that has come our way.

FFP: If you could look into a crystal ball, how would the future of Summer Citrus in the U.S. look?

You know, 23 years back, my first international phone call was to a German trader and I asked them, 'what do you think the market is going to be like next week?'. He told me 'if I had a crystal ball, I'd tell you'. I think it's wishful thinking.

For us, we have a strong group of people, service providers, retailers and importers around the table that have really played an important part in our success. I think we ship sustainable volumes into the U.S. - the shipments aren't very up and down.

It's important to watch the window of opportunity and for us to gather as much information as possible, because that window will differ from year to year. This year, the window's a little wider, but it's important for us to carefully watch that so we understand our opportunity and don't compete with local production.

I think that we are selling a county with confidence. We have the world's finest summer citrus, we have great eating quality, and traditionally South Africa has a very good name in terms of quality across the world. I think that's really important.