

## **Celebrating Excellence: !Xhariep Agricultural Writers SA Regional Awards Recognise Leaders in Agriculture**

Durbanville – The 2024 !Xhariep Agricultural Writers SA Regional Awards was a celebration of a dynamic industry and its people. The awards recognised farmers and agriculturalists who lead the charge in agriculture in the region. The !Xhariep region includes the Western Cape, Northern Cape and Eastern Cape.

Peter Pentz, Chairperson of !Xhariep Agricultural Writers SA, emphasised the importance of cooperation in agriculture during his opening remarks. “Collaboration is the foundation of growth in agriculture. By working together, we can not only solve problems but also create new opportunities. Agriculture is a collective effort, not an individual pursuit. It flourishes through the shared contributions of farmers, researchers, policymakers, and the private sector. Whether through joint research or technology transfer, the power of collaboration will continue to shape the future of agriculture. Let us commit ourselves to building stronger partnerships, for it is through unity that we will truly thrive.”

Jannie Strydom, CEO of Agri Western Cape was the guest speaker and emphasised the importance of agriculture in the province and greater region. "The area under agriculture in the Western Cape equals only 10% of the total area under agriculture in South Africa, yet the Western Cape is responsible for 55% of South Africa's export of primary agricultural products. According to the most recent data, the agriculture sector contributes R73 Billion towards the province's economy. Primary agriculture contributes 4% to the provincial economy and secondary agriculture 7%. Totalling more than 11%, this emphasises the massive value of the entire agricultural value chain and the industry's contribution to job creation." According to Strydom Agriculture in the province is in good shape, despite the challenges around storm damages. He also identified the Western Cape Department of Agriculture's contributions as a positive factor.

The Agricultural Writers SA awards honour excellence in agriculture by recognising leading agricultural role-players who dedicate their efforts to advancing sustainable farming practices, strengthening food security, boosting rural economies, and enhancing the image of agriculture in South Africa.

This year's !Xhariep regional winners in the respective categories are:

### **WESTERN CAPE AGRICULTURALIST OF THE YEAR - DR ERNA BLANCQUAERT** ***Nominated by Ivor Price, Food for Mzansi***

Dr Erna Blancquaert is a trailblazer in viticulture, uniquely positioned at the intersection of groundbreaking research and practical agricultural application. As the first black female to earn a PhD in Viticulture on the African continent, she has become a key figure in advancing grapevine and wine sciences, with her career rooted deeply in her long-standing affiliation to Stellenbosch University, where she continues to inspire future generations.

Her expertise in grapevine stress physiology is instrumental in addressing the pressing challenges posed by climate change. Through her innovative research, Dr Blancquaert

equips farmers with vital tools to adapt to unpredictable climate conditions, enhancing both sustainability and productivity within the South African wine industry.

Her pioneering investigations into using seaweed extracts as bio stimulants exemplify her commitment to offering sustainable alternatives to traditional agricultural practices. This work not only improves grapevine health but also helps farmers reduce their environmental footprint while ensuring high-quality yields.

Dr Blancquaert's contributions extend beyond academia; her active involvement in industry initiatives, such as the Deciduous Fruit Industry's Development Trust, ensures that her research translates into practical, actionable insights for farmers. Her leadership in international collaborations, particularly her role in the VitaGlobal project, underscores her influence in global viticulture education and research.

Her numerous accolades, including the Fulbright African Research Scholar Award and the Golden Vines Master of Wine Scholarship, highlight her status as a thought leader in the field. Dr Blancquaert's published research in top-tier international journals further cements her authority and inspires future generations of viticulturists.

Her commitment to agricultural innovation, coupled with her groundbreaking research and dedication to farmer empowerment, makes her an exemplary candidate for Agricultural Researcher of the Year. She is not just shaping the future of viticulture in South Africa; she is inspiring a global movement toward sustainable agriculture.

## **WESTERN CAPE NEW ENTRANT TO COMMERCIAL FARMING - SHEENA PAULUS, TRI TOAD NURSERY**

***Nominated by Ivor Price, Food for Mzansi***

Since its inception in 2022, Tri Toad Nursery, under the leadership of Sheena Paulus, has emerged as a formidable player in the commercial seedling and plant industry. Based in Philippi, Cape Town, this dynamic, women-owned nursery specialises in cultivating premium vegetable, herb, and flower seedlings, supplying retail garden centres such as Stodels, Cape Gardens, and Buco.

Sheena has also forged impactful partnerships with Food & Trees for Africa, distributing fruit trees while simultaneously engaging in competitive procurement processes to collaborate with agricultural projects. Her diverse clientele also includes commercial farmers.

What sets Tri Toad apart is its unwavering commitment to innovation and sustainability. Utilising vertical soilless hydroponic systems, Sheena's nursery produces in-season flowers, pot plants, peppers, chilies, and herbs, all while maximising space and minimising resource consumption.

This approach has not only bolstered productivity but has also translated into impressive financial returns, with the nursery generating substantial revenue – estimated at over R3 million annually.

Tri Toad Nursery is not just about profits; it's a powerhouse for community upliftment. Sheena has donated over 2 million seedlings to more than 30 nonprofit organisations, schools, and community food gardens, fostering food security and empowering local communities. Operating with a zero-waste policy, the nursery repurposes all plant waste, demonstrating a holistic approach to sustainability.

Despite navigating the challenges of a male-dominated industry, Sheena has built a thriving team, expanding from a solo operation to employing 12 full-time staff members and scaling up to 24 part-time employees during peak seasons. Her ambitious plans include constructing a 3 500 square meter solar-powered greenhouse, reinforcing her commitment to green, energy-efficient practices while exploring the emerging cannabis industry.

### **EASTERN CAPE NEW ENTRANT TO COMMERCIAL FARMING - THULANI MAGIDA, JUTA AGRITECH**

*Nominated by Patricia Thembo, Food for Mzansi*

Thulani Magida, owner of Juta Agritech, brings a fresh perspective to farming in Qonce (formerly King William's Town) in the Eastern Cape. Operating on 28 of 45 hectares of communal land, he has diversified his farming enterprise to include high-demand vegetables like butternut, pumpkin, cabbage, and potatoes, as well as a thriving piggery.

His farming business doesn't just stop at cultivation and livestock – it's a comprehensive operation offering agri-consulting services to new-era farmers, focusing on budgeting, cash flow management, and business planning.

Armed with a Master's degree in agricultural economics as well as an MBA, Magida leverages his six years of experience in the Department of Agriculture and nine years in the private sector to maximise productivity.

His expertise in production economics has seen his potato yields improve from 22 tonnes per hectare to 35, and he's on track to hit the industry benchmark of 40 tonnes. His cabbage yields are similarly strong, with 76% of crops making the cut for packaging.

Magida is also a forward-thinking farmer, harnessing the power of technology. His proficiency in drone technology for precision farming has enabled him to monitor crops, reduce chemical usage, and minimise water wastage, all while promoting sustainability. He's turned this into an additional business service, bridging the technology gap for emerging farmers.

Despite facing challenges such as limited access to finance and working on communal land, Magida is a calculated risk-taker. He's investing in permanent land to scale his business and introducing frost-resistant crops to mitigate climate-related risks. With a clear focus on growth and innovation, he is breaking through as a force to be reckoned with among newly commercialising farmers in South Africa.

**WESTERN CAPE FARMER OF THE YEAR - ANDRÉ BRINK, GROOT PHESANTEKRAAL  
BOERDERY TRUST**  
*Nominated by Hugo Lochner*

Groot Phesantekraal Boerdery is a well-diversified farming business on the outskirts of Durbanville. The fourth and fifth generation of the Brink family, André Brink and his sons Rennie and Jeandre, are at the helm of the farm today.

André took over Groot Phesantekraal in 1996. The farm then consisted of 350 hectares of crops, 800 sheep ewes and 50 beef cattle.

Today he farms on 4 650 ha of his own land and 850 ha of leased land. Small grain is grown on 2 500 ha, there is 1 500 ha of medic pasture, 180 ha of vineyards and a 500-ton wine cellar. The sheep herd grew to 3 500 Dohne Merino ewes and the beef cattle herd to 400 Hereford cows.

Groot Phesantekraal is a 100% family business. André is responsible for the overall management and identifies new opportunities for expansions and value addition. Rennie runs the small grain and wine departments, while Jeandre focuses on the livestock department and the feed factory. André's wife, Ronelle, handles the marketing, administration and export of the wine.

Groot Phesantekraal has six farming branches, namely small grain, livestock, wine grapes, a feed factory, hospitality that brings farming closer to the consumer and a non-agricultural branch (building department) that helps to spread the farm's risk. The business places a great focus on value addition in all the branches.

André manages risks proactively. He believes a farm, like any other business, must guard against stagnation and he tries to stay on the cutting edge of new technology and new farming methods. "However, technology is expensive, so it needs to be functional and add value. It should also be used cost-effectively to optimally manage land use and to maintain natural resources."

**The regional awards set the stage for the forthcoming National Agricultural Writers Awards scheduled to take place on Friday 15 November 2024 in Pretoria.**

For media inquiries and further information, please contact: [peter@grootepest.co.za](mailto:peter@grootepest.co.za)

[More photographs available on request](#)

Captions:

Xhariep1: Daneel Rossouw, Nedbank, Peter Pentz, Sheena Paulus, Thulani Magida, Dr Erna Blancquaert, André Brink and Henno Senekal, Old Mutual.

Xhariep2: Jannie Strydom speaking at the event.

