South Africa's 2026 lemon season navigates rain and geopolitical headwinds

By Fred Meintjes | 13 July 2026

Despite weather-hit harvests and export route disruptions caused by Middle East conflict, the lemon season remains on track to deliver 49.4mn cartons

Image: Adobe Stock

The 2026 South African lemon season has once again highlighted how quickly global markets can change, and how success depends on the industry's ability to adapt.

From prolonged rainfall delaying harvests to geopolitical uncertainty disrupting traditional export routes, the season has presented growers with a unique set of challenges.

Yet, despite these disruptions, strong demand for premium lemons and growing consumer interest in seedless varieties have created new opportunities.

The current export estimate for the entire national lemon season remains unchanged at 49.4mn 15kg cartons.

South Africa’s northern production regions, which traditionally supply the earliest lemons to international markets, experienced persistent rainfall during the harvesting period.

“Normally, our grower partners begin harvesting in December, with January and February representing our peak picking period,” explained Nico van Schalkwyk of ClemenGold International.

“This year, continuous rain meant we simply didn’t have enough dry windows to harvest. As a result, fruit was picked significantly later than usual.”

The delayed harvest meant South African exporters missed part of the early marketing window – particularly in the Middle East, one of the country’s most important strategic markets.

The Citrus Growers’ Association of Southern Africa (CGA) has reported a strong lemon season for 2026.

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However, the season has been notable for both the larger size of the crop and the earlier timing of the campaign.

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The lemon season for the northern growing regions has effectively drawn to a close, with final volumes being in line with the updated estimates communicated throughout the season.

As elsewhere in the country, this increase was largely due to increased rainfall resulting in improved fruit size.

The Sundays River Valley in the Eastern Cape, widely regarded as one of the premier lemon-growing regions, has shown significantly increased yields per hectare, marking a welcome recovery after two consecutive years of average crops.

“This season has also produced an unusual packing pattern.

For the first time, a significant number of Sundays River Valley producers completed close to 80 per cent of their lemon crop by the end of June – a departure from previous seasons in which progress across the valley has typically been far more uniform," explained Hannes de Waal, vice-chair of the CGA and chief executive of the Sundays River Citrus Company.

While the Sundays River Valley did not experience major flooding, growers say there is a potential downstream impact of those weather events.

The timing of the Western Cape's lemon season mirrors that of the Eastern Cape, with a sudden tapering off expected soon.

The CGA said the season is not without its pressures.

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East is having a tangible effect on export routes and market access, particularly for grade 3 fruit destined for Iraq.

The additional cost of transshipping through Turkey has rendered those supply lines uneconomical, and very little grade 3 fruit is currently being packed for that market.