

THE UNIQUE ROOIBOS SEED



1. The Rooibos plant

THE ROOIBOS PLANT

(*Aspalathus linearis*) is a leguminous shrub that is unique to the Cederberg Mountains around Clanwilliam and indigenous to the Western Cape of South Africa. It forms part of the Cape Floral Kingdom, commonly known as fynbos, and is a member of the Fabaceae family, a genus with more than 200 species.

During October, the plant is covered with diminutive yellow flowers and each flower produces only one small seed pod. Each pod contains a single, tiny, pale pinkish-yellow, kidney-shaped and hard-shelled seed.



2. Gathering seeds

THE TINY ROOIBOS SEEDS are very difficult to gather as they disperse as soon as the pods split open. The early collectors gathered them one by one with moistened matchsticks. As a result of the difficulty of gathering Rooibos seed, seed prices soared in the early 1900s, reaching £85 per pound or '£5 for a flat matchbox filled with seeds' (about R7 000 in today's terms).

One breakthrough came in the form of a tiny insect. On Olof Bergh's farm, workers Tryntjie Swarts and her husband Hans had noticed that certain ants collected the seeds and carried them to their nests. Inside the nests the couple found heaps of seeds.

Other unexpected sources were found. One involved Piet

van Rhyn, who lived in the Nardouwsberg Mountains and who was in the habit of shooting the Namaqua sandgrouse that pecked in the plantations of his neighbour. Van Rhyn slit the birds' gizzards to collect the Rooibos seeds they seemed to enjoy and sold these to the Nardouwsberg farmers.

As the seeds became more readily available, an increasing number of farm owners started to grow Rooibos on lands already under cultivation on the higher-lying mountain plateaus.

Today the soil around the bushes is sifted and panned by hand to collect the seeds for new seed beds and the cultivation of the next generation of Rooibos plants.



3. The ‘riddle of germination’

IN THE MID-1920S, the demand for Rooibos outstripped the number of shrubs in the Cederberg.

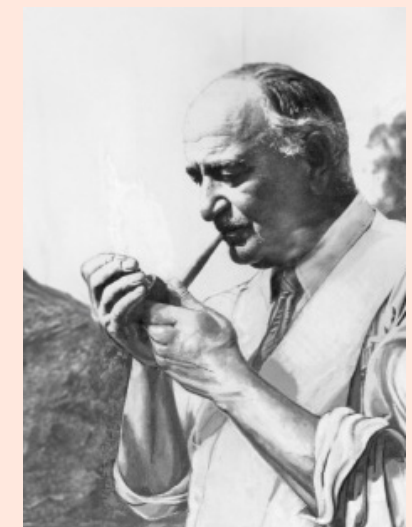
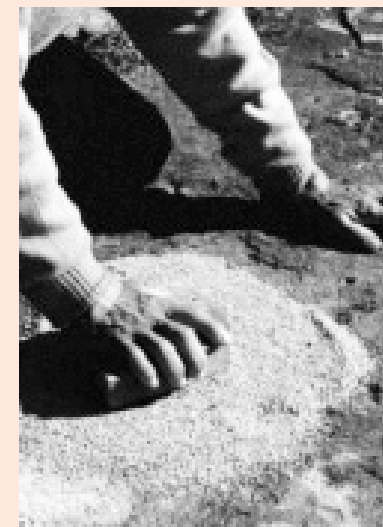
New cultivation and harvesting techniques were needed. Rooibos had to be treated as an agricultural crop.

Dr Pieter Le Fras Nortier – a local surgeon and magistrate, botanist, Oxford Rhodes scholar and owner of the farm Klein Kliphuis, discussed the possibility of cultivating Rooibos in plantations with entrepreneur and Rooibos marketer Benjamin Ginsberg and farmer Olof Bergh. The model they investigated was that of the large plantations of black tea that were created in India in the mid-19th century by the British, who followed the tradition of sugar-cane

plantations in the Caribbean. Nortier began to collect seeds from the superior form of Rooibos called Red, which grows in the Pakhuis and Grootkloof mountains.

The next step was to address the extremely low germination of seeds or, as Ginsberg put it, to solve ‘the riddle of germination’. Nortier, in all probability using old Mediterranean hard-shelled seed germination techniques, scarified the outer covering of the tiny seeds and planted them in seedbeds. The experiment was successful and Nortier eventually managed to harvest 80 bags of tea on Klein Kliphuis. Seedlings were also replanted at Bergh’s farm Varkenfontein as well as at Klein Kliphuis, where Nortier began to establish Rooibos plantations.

Nortier, who is hailed as the ‘father of the Rooibos industry’, was awarded an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, Victoria College (today Stellenbosch University) for his research on tea and other agricultural endeavours. Today an average 16 000 metric tonnes of Rooibos is produced in South Africa every year, of which around 50% is exported to 60 countries around the world. And it all began with the small and unassuming Rooibos seed.



4. From seed to mature plant

1. Hard-shelled, dicotyledonous seeds
2. After 4 to 6 days of germination, 2 cotyledons appear above the ground
3. The young Rooibos plant with its developing root system after 7 to 8 months
4. The mature plant grows to about 1,5 metres in height over a period of 18 months



