South Africa citrus sees opportunities for growth in southern U.S. markets

South Africa's 2026 citrus export season to the United States is drawing to a close. While final fruit is still moving through the market, the last substantial volumes arrived on the U.S. east coast during the second week of October. Although slightly lower volumes were shipped compared to last year's record season, there were continued opportunities for growth.

Orange shipments, including Navels and Midknights, were slightly lower. Mandarin shipments on the other hand showed an increase over last year and Star Ruby grapefruit shipments remained relatively stable. "However, the emphasis remains on matching shipments with market demand rather than pushing higher volumes," says Suhanra Conradie with Summer Citrus from South Africa. Overall, Conradie describes the season as a positive one, although the final sales are still being concluded.



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Consistency and communication remain priorities

For South African citrus exporters, the U.S. remains an important market in which growers and service providers have invested considerable time and resources. Conradie emphasizes that individual seasons should not be viewed in isolation, as long-term relationships and careful supply planning are essential to maintaining a reliable export program.

"What differentiates us is the quality and consistency of the product, the transparency we offer as a country of origin, and the communication we send out to the industry," she explains. Summer Citrus from South Africa works with growers, shipping lines, importers, and retailers to coordinate supply with anticipated demand. Weekly shipment information is shared throughout the supply chain, providing receivers with greater visibility of incoming volumes and helping them plan distribution and retail programs.

This coordination becomes particularly important when unexpected circumstances affect harvesting and logistics. During May, excessive rainfall in South Africa temporarily disrupted operations, creating some delays in the supply chain. "However, the industry was able to adjust shipment schedules and maintain its commitments to customers," Conradie shared.

"The goal is fresh weekly supply. Not one week a lot of fruit and the next week nothing." Maintaining this consistency requires careful coordination between harvesting, shipping, repacking, and distribution, particularly given the limited shelf life of fresh citrus.

Opportunities for growth in the southern U.S.

Looking ahead, Conradie sees opportunities for continued expansion in the American market, although she stresses that growth must remain closely aligned with demand. Under favorable market conditions, she believes annual volume increases of approximately 10 to 15 percent could be achievable. Larger increases would require strong demand signals and considerably more advance planning. "I think there's definitely room for sustained growth, because that's the goal. Not just sending more product," she explains.

Philadelphia remains the main entry point for South African citrus entering the U.S. market. The port's infrastructure, together with the concentration of importers, repackers, and retail distribution operations in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, makes it particularly well suited to handling perishable products. Direct shipments from Cape Town to Philadelphia remain central to the program.

However, a weekly container service to Savannah is creating additional opportunities to serve customers in the southern United States. Conradie sees potential to develop markets in Georgia, Florida, and Texas while improving logistical efficiency for customers in those regions.

"Philadelphia will always remain our main hub. Savannah would be additional growth, not business taken away from Philadelphia," Conradie emphasizes. The alternative entry point could provide greater flexibility as demand develops across different parts of the country. MSC offers a weekly service to Savannah, additional to their container service to Philadelphia.



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Midknights fill an important late-season window

One of the distinctive features of South Africa's citrus program is the availability of Midknight oranges toward the end of the Southern Hemisphere season. While most Navel shipments have already concluded, Midknights continue to provide an opportunity for retailers during October, ahead of the start of California's orange season. "October is really the month to move Midknights. It's something unique that South Africa offers," says Conradie. "When all the Navel oranges are done and before California starts, there's a window for Midknights."

In addition to Midknights, the final shipments also include limited volumes of Star Ruby grapefruit and easy peelers. Conradie notes that the growing interest in mandarins is closely connected to retailer demand for year-round availability, supported by consumer interest in convenient citrus products.

With the 2026 campaign nearly completed, preparations for 2027 are already approaching. Shipping commitments, supply planning, and coordination with U.S. authorities will begin well ahead of the next harvest. As the export program develops, Conradie believes the industry's ability to communicate clearly, manage unexpected challenges, and maintain dependable weekly supplies will remain central to its position in the U.S. market.

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