



V-NEWS

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People of Note

BILL KERR



Unassuming and humble, the lean, fit figure of Bill Kerr leads the way through his breeding tunnels, every now and then stopping to pick a tomato, cut off a piece and give it to me to taste. "This year I am valuating 750 varieties of tomatoes to select the ones I want to breed." He is looking firstly at good taste and firmness, then yield and disease resistance. "Crossing is a long and

meticulous process," he explains, reminding me of one of my patient but passionate lecturers of years back, "tomatoes originally came from Central and South America. It was the famous Captain Cooke who introduced tomatoes to Europe. Did you know that there is a worm repellent in the form of small hairs on tomato leaves? They simply fall off."

For the last 20 years he has been breeding new and exciting hybrids of vegetables in the plot behind his house in Henley on Klip. Apart from tomatoes, Bill has 200 breeding lines of peppers where he will make 1000 new crosses this year, 200 chillies, commercial varieties of pumpkins and patty pans, baby marrows and some exciting gems with less seeds and more flesh, great tasting. Bill explains that it can take up to 15 years to develop a satisfactory new variety of tomato, 4 years for beans and 12 years for carrots. New diseases attack vegetables all the time.

Plant breeding is very demanding. Bill has developed his own unique ways of cross pollinating which takes a fraction of the time. Nevertheless, the hours are long and holidays non-existent.

As a little boy, Bill was much more interested in insects and bugs than plants. He grew up a city boy around Johannesburg and Pretoria.

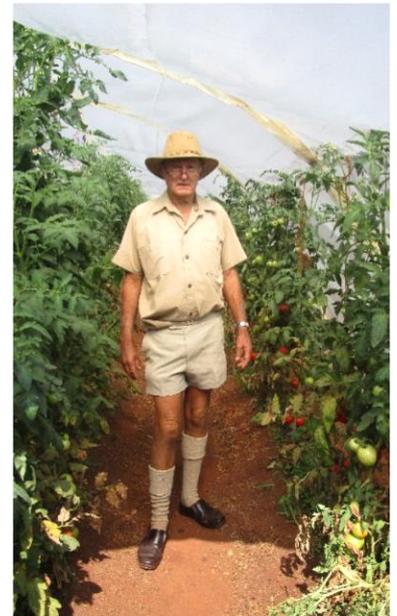
It was his dream to study entomology. His father, a bank inspector for Barclays Bank, steered him into agriculture by sending him to Western Farming School and afterwards to Sedara Agricultural College. He went to work for H.L. Hall & Sons in Nelspruit, at the time the biggest privately owned estate in SA growing and marketing vegetables. Another good learning curve was working for Barvale Dehydration Factory where he got to visit many farmers by inspecting their crops and drawing up contracts, thereby taking note of successes and failures. Due to the climate and incessant hay fever, he had to return to the Highveld where he was technical director for Mayford.

38 years ago the family moved to Henley into the beautiful old fashioned house where they are still living. When Bill decided to become an independent breeder, he mostly taught himself plant genetics from books. He contacted professors in South Africa and around the world, trying to get answers to his many questions.

In a competitive market with hundreds of breeders, Bill has nevertheless made his mark not only in South Africa, but also in Europe and America.

Although it is a tough profession, he is happy in what he is doing. On top of his untiring work among his

breeding vegetables, he writes weekly articles in the Farmer's Weekly. He feels excitement every time he does a crossing, waiting and watching with expectation as new varieties develop. He carries every Breeding line's history in his mind.



“One day, that big market leader will develop out of all my labour,” he exclaims with a smile. Although his time is limited, Bill loves advising and mentoring younger people, such as Sean Freeman. (See V-News issue 14, July 2015)

Bill among his many lines of different pumpkins

Bill is working on a book about natural vegetable growing in the home garden.



We look forward to that book, Bill! He leans heavily on the Lord for protection for both him and his family’s health, as he has no medical aid or insurance. He prays and trusts God will protect his hard work. He recalls many a time when a typical Highveld hail storm was approaching his field when he went out and spoke to the storm, which would part and go right around his place without one piece of hail damaging his crops. “God is good and faithful.”

Man, alone, has the power to transform his thoughts into physical reality; man, alone, can dream and make his dreams come true. (Napoleon Hill)



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IN MEMORIAM

It is with great sadness that we have learned of the demise of our lovely friendly lady behind the counter of Jaco’s Hardware shop. Lizette has fought a brave battle with cancer, always staying positive and professional, never letting up about her personal struggles. We will all miss her. Our condolences to her family.

CONTRIBUTIONS, LETTERS, SUGGESTIONS

Readers are welcome to submit letters, articles, adverts and suggestions to the Editor via e-mail charlotte.s@telkomsa.net or phone 016 365-5432.

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