

THE CHERIMOYA IN SOUTH AFRICA

C. A. Schroeder

University of California, Los Angeles.

Possibly the world's largest cherimoya orchard is located at Little Brak River, Cape Province, South Africa. Approximately 200 miles east of Capetown on Mousel Bay is the 5,000 acre farm of Mr. Peter Robertson. The diversified farm produces among the tree crops avocado, mango, guava and cherimoya in quantity. Vegetables, hay, maize and other occasional crops are also planted. Aside from several head of cattle, a profitable enterprise is the ostrich, which is raised for its feathers, hide and meat in the form of jerky. The "Old Homestead" was first purchased in 1850 when Peters' grandfather settled in the area. The original holdings date back to a Fruchet land grant of 1780. Peter's father, Ernest Robertson, became interested in the cherimoya about 1948 when he obtained some seed to provide the initial planting of 20 seedling trees. The orchard now occupies approximately 120 acres and consists of 4,000 mature trees. Throughout many years the variability in production and quality has been acceptable but now an attempt is under way to improve this production and quality by top-working the poor yielders and low quality trees to a selection of local scions which have promise.

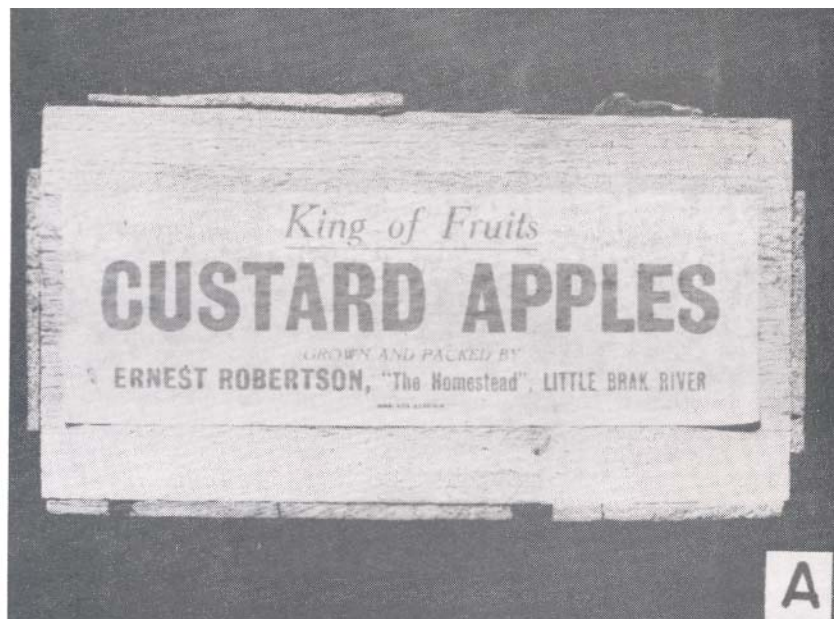
Yields in the Robertson planting are highly variable between trees from season to season. While no recorded figures are available for individual trees, casual observation indicates certain trees have been consistently better in production and in quality. Total production of the orchard has nearly always been adequate to provide a good crop though some trees have been without fruit. While hand pollination undoubtedly would improve this situation, natural pollination has been relied upon entirely.

Approximately 50 per cent of the cherimoya production of the "Homestead" is sent to the Capetown market where good prices are received. Another 2.5 per cent is sold in Port Elizabeth and 10 percent in Uitenhage. The remainder is marketed locally. Sorting and size grading are done on the farm. The standard 10 pound wooden box contains 6 to 10 fruits. This is shipped via truck without refrigeration. The quality of the fruit is good in appearance, symmetrical in form and of excellent eating quality. The cherimoya season is May 1 to October.

There are only occasional isolated dooryard cherimoya trees in South Africa aside from the commercial planting at Little Brak. The atemoya "Kaller" and "18/6" from Israel have recently been introduced into East Transvaal but little information is available concerning the behavior of these except they are growing well and appear less susceptible to false codling moth. A local species of *Annona crysophylle* makes a good rootstock for *A. cherimola*, *A. Squamosa* and *A. reticulata* according to Dr. Peter Allan. Occasional trays of cherimoya appear in the Pietermaritzburg, Natal market from the odd trees in the coastal area.

The false codling moth is by far the greatest problem for the cherimoya grower in South Africa. Occasionally the fruit bat has been a serious pest, but this interesting flying mammal fluctuates in number and has appeared to be diminishing during the past five years in the Little Brak area. The fruit bat roosts high in the trees where he feeds on the maturing fruit. Frequently the fruit is only partially consumed or a single bite may be taken before dropping it to the ground. Considerable devastation has been wrought on occasion when a concerted attack by large numbers of the bats has occurred. Shooting the bats at night with aid of a flashlight has provided some degree of control.

The cherimoya is most commonly known in South Africa as the "custard apple." While the fruit is well known in some of the larger market areas, in fact it appears to be unknown to most people in that part of the world. Peter Robertson and his father, who presently produce nearly all the commercial fruit, are enthusiastic regarding the future of this crop in South Africa.





A. Standard cherimoya crate and trademark of "The Homestead" farm, Little Brak River, South Africa.

B. Portion of 120 acre cherimoya orchard at Little Brak River, South Africa.