

# Murray Thompson: Back to basics to remain effective

By Harrie Greebe, communication manager, Potatoes SA

**W**hen Murray Thompson, former National Potato Farmer of the Year, was elected as chairperson of Potatoes SA, he initiated a back-to-basics drive. Thompson was elected as the new chairperson during the biennial Potatoes SA Congress on 16 July this year for a renewable four-year term.

Originally from Shanghai, Thompson took over Anthorn Farming from his late father and has been farming for 12 years. His ethos of achieving success by sticking to the basics earned him the title of Potato Farmer of the Year in 2022. The principles applied at Anthorn Farming in Christiana in the North West are based on three main pillars.



*Murray Thompson, newly elected chairperson of Potatoes SA.*

The first priority is implementing a straightforward business plan, executing it effectively, and maintaining fundamental farming principles without resorting to overly radical innovations. The second aspect is supporting everyone involved in the potato industry across the entire value chain. Thirdly, incorporating the seed industry's technical support, high-quality plant materials, and assistance are essential ingredients in Anthorn Farming's recipe for success, meeting both consumer and industry demands.

## A winning approach

Thompson and his team cultivate 300 ha of potatoes using irrigation from the Vaal River. They do not differentiate between table potato and seed plantings, splitting the planting into 30% seed with the remainder cultivated for the fresh produce markets. This clearly demonstrates Thompson's comprehensive knowledge of both the table potato and seed potato industries.

A different approach is followed where all stakeholders, including staff, suppliers, consultants, or market agents add value. These stakeholders are afforded the opportunity to make their contributions to the Anthorn business within a framework where they can still have a sustainable business of their own. According to Thompson, a friendly stakeholder management system is one thing they excel at.

He emphasises their strong commitment to sustainable farming, particularly through the practice of crop rotation. They follow a seven-year cycle, starting with potatoes, then maize, with grass in-between.

Afterwards, the land lies fallow for five years, allowing the soil to rest and maintain healthy microbial life in a natural environment.

## The perfect skills set

Thompson says that before the congress he was approached by several people requesting his candidacy for chairpersonship. He attributes this to his neutral independence rather than any specific affiliation within the potato community. His unique blend of South African roots and international business expertise makes him an ideal advocate for impartial leadership in a complex industry. The key is following a holistic approach rather than becoming entangled in regional agendas.

In the potato industry, both the seed and table streams are interdependent. Thompson asserts that the efficiently run seed industry requires minimal additional oversight. However, as chairperson of Potatoes SA, he wears the table producers' hat from which he can launch a few rockets. He believes that the overall framework of the potato industry model is well-suited, but there is room for optimisation.

Thompson is thrilled by the idea of promoting potatoes as a vegetable rather than a starch, and sees a golden opportunity to significantly increase daily potato consumption. He envisions disrupting the antiquated interaction between the informal sector and formal municipal markets, using the markets as part of the solution. South African fresh produce markets offer a unique opportunity where producers can deliver commercial volumes while allowing informal trade to buy in smaller quantities,

thus bridging the gap between the two economies.

### Innovative ideas

Thompson proposes establishing satellite markets that can logistically enhance the accessibility of produce to the informal market, presenting an ideal opportunity for government involvement in macro-economic food security. While export markets are volatile and present short-term, high-risk opportunities for substantial


profits, he advocates for local markets that offer more sustainable options due to their stable demand.

Since potatoes have a high calorific value, Thompson supports making them a standard excellent addition to school feeding programmes.

Each production region has its unique challenges, and Potatoes SA's mandate is to address universal issues through the national statutory levy. Thompson foresees Potatoes SA creating a framework for regions,

if there is consensus, to manage their specific needs through a temporary additional regional levy.

### Transforming agriculture

Thompson is passionate about enhancing the prominence of Potatoes SA's transformative role. Transformation is essential for the long-term sustainability of agriculture, and the potential for change is immense. Potatoes are the crop with the greatest potential for expansion, allowing producers to grow from 0.1 ha to large commercial enterprises. This is not feasible with grain, for example, because the profit margin per ha is too low. "Our role as leaders in transformation is both a golden opportunity and a responsibility. We can easily upscale our efforts, especially with the resources we have, such as potatoes." 

Thompson hopes the leadership of Potatoes SA will take greater responsibility for optimising the efficiency of existing structures, evoking more enthusiasm in their regions for participation. When members take ownership and participate, there are benefits; without it, there are none.

He firmly believes that South African producers, particularly those who cultivate potatoes, are the best in the world. "Our yield benchmarks, when compared globally, truly place us at the top. This is largely because our blended economy benefits from both affordable labour and access to advanced technology. Therefore, if we can maintain political stability, the potential for our agricultural future is limitless."

Thompson believes no significant changes are needed for Potatoes SA: "We have a compelling story that should be shared more enthusiastically".

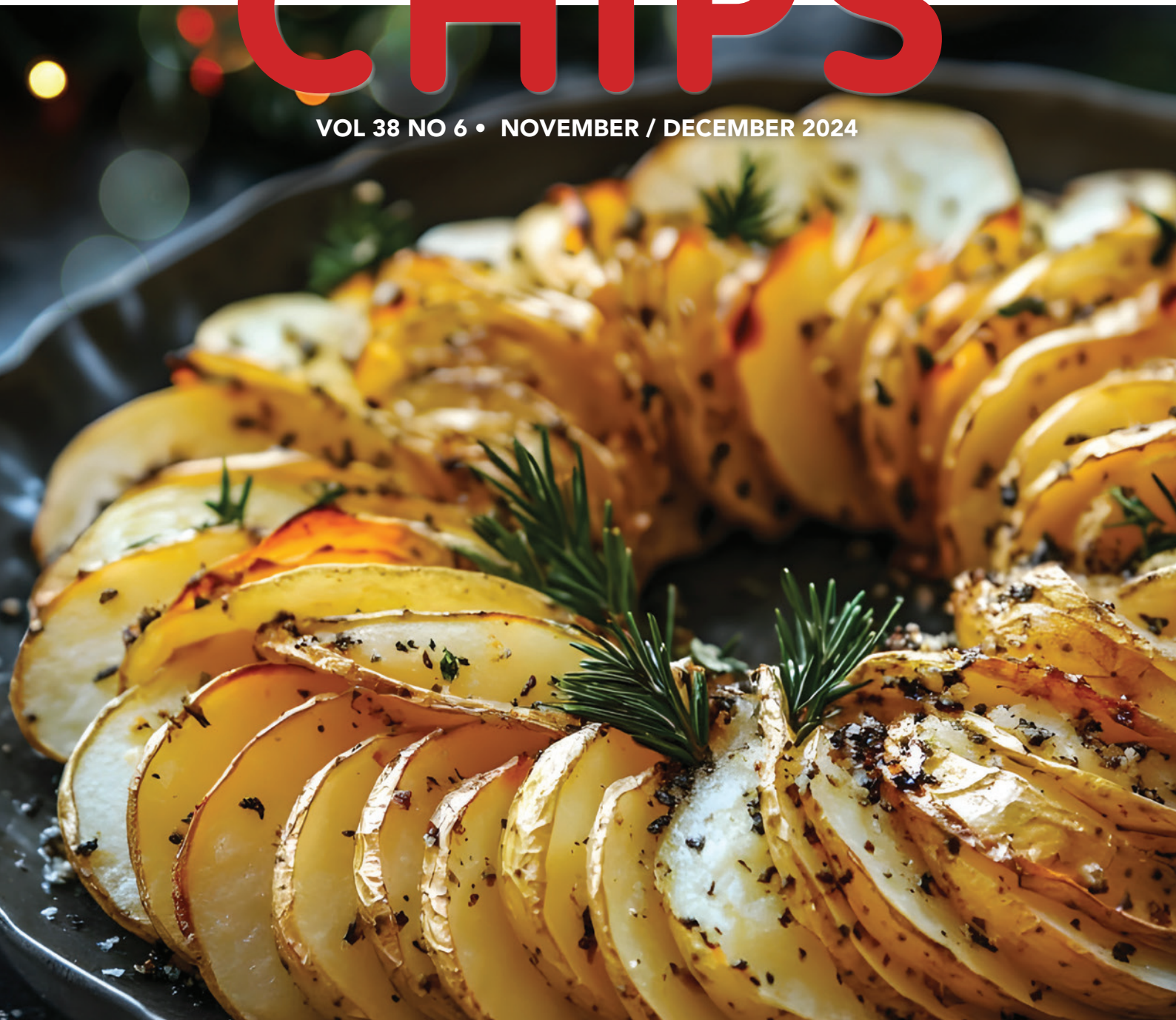
For more information,  
email Hanrie Greebe at  
[hanrie@potatoes.co.za](mailto:hanrie@potatoes.co.za).



Mondstuk van die Suid-Afrikaanse aartappelbedryf • Mouthpiece of the South African potato industry

# CHIPS

VOL 38 NO 6 • NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2024



**HP SMIT EN SEUNS BOERDERY:  
SPANDINAMIKA ONDERSKEI  
DIË BOERDERY VAN ANDER**

**EFFECT OF FUNGICIDE APPLICATION  
ON POTATO CULTIVARS AT CEDARA  
IN THE 2023/24 GROWING SEASON**

**Soil health:  
Bedrock of potato farming**

**Ontwikkeling van streekspesifieke  
wisselbouprogramme: Oos-Vrystaat**

**The Soweto Kota Festival:  
Celebrating potato versatility**

