

Pumpkin farming turns woman's fortunes around

PICTURE: PETER OCHIENG

■ HAROLD AYODO

PUMPKIN farming in Homa Bay District may turn around the region's economy.

Margaret Okendo, the first person to plant *Squash Butter Nut*, says she used to grow maize and cotton but the profit margin was so small.

Okendo's life has never been the same again after an NGO introduced the pumpkin variety in the area last year.

She turned her one acre piece of land into a pumpkin farm and has never regretted the move.

"When I used to plant cotton, millet and maize I struggled to make ends meet. I lived from hand to mouth," recounts the 45-year-old woman.

But after Horticulture Development Centre (HDC) introduced the pumpkins to enhance food security she now has surplus money to.

"The NGO came here in 2003 and educated the locals on pumpkin growing. They had a demonstration site where I learnt the farming techniques," says Okendo.

"Before, cotton used to sell at Sh23 a kilo then the price fell to Sh17. Irregular payments by local ginners made matters worse," she says.

The decision to switch to pumpkins was a hard one.

However she took the risk and planted the pumpkins in October last year - a move that turned her into a laughing stock.

"The villagers said I was crazy for trying to grow a crop that has never been cultivated in the area," she says.

Three months later, she realised she had made no mistake after her first harvest raked in Sh53, 200.

"I had never thought of handling so much money," she says.

The only challenge she encountered was how to market the pumpkins in an area, where fish is the staple food.

Okendo had to convince locals that pumpkins are edible. She cooked some at home and carried them to the market.

Okendo says people asked to taste the ones she had prepared before they bought the raw ones.

The mother of 12 improved her marketing strategy by being photographed tending to the pumpkins in her farm and when cooking them. She did this to convince her customers that the vegetables are grown locally.

Okendo hanged the photographs in her stall at Homa Bay market and was surprised that the idea worked.

She won the customers' confidence and they flocked her stall.

"They actually scrambled for the pumpkins," she says with a bemused look on her face.

"There are those who pay in advance and insist on getting them early in the morning," she says.

Okendo says pumpkins are preferred by many because it can be eaten for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

"Majority of villagers are poor and prefer something that reduces their spending," she says.

Okendo sells the pumpkins at Sh50 for large ones and Sh30 for small ones.

"There are those who have approached me to share my know found knowledge with them," says a smiling Okendo. A number of them have quit growing cotton and maize and turned to pumpkins.

"Whenever they experience problems they come to me for advice," Okendo says.

Okendo has now been able to take her four children to secondary schools.

Currently she is waiting for her next harvest in three months time.

She plans to practice drip irrigation to increase her harvest and look for fresh market in supermarkets, schools and colleges.

HDC Agronomist Fred Ochieng' says the drought



Margaret Okendo shows off some of the pumpkins from her farm in Homa Bay District. says she stopped planting maize and cotton after realising that they are not profitable and take several months to mature.

resistant crop has the capacity of producing 20 tons per acre.

"We introduced the crop in Western Kenya as the climate and soil suits it," says Ochieng.

Growing pumpkins is cost effective because you only need farmyard manure and watering during the early

stages.

The pumpkin variety is drought resistant and is harvested four times a year says the agronomist.

Homa Bay District Agricultural Officer Nathan Soire says the crop could boost food security in the area.

The District's poverty index is above 70 per cent and this

could be reversed with discovery that pumpkin do so well in the area," Soire.

"Over 60 per cent of area's population is food - a situation that can be reversed by growing cash crops towards food security," Soire.