

New horticultural crop introduced in Mwingi

By KITAVI MUTUA

A new horticultural crop for arid areas has been introduced in Kitui and Mwingi districts of Eastern Province.

Farmers from the two districts now join others from low agricultural potential areas in exporting the African Birds Eye Chilli — a hot variety of pepper — to the European and Asian markets.

The crop, which requires few, if any, inputs has been introduced by Fintrac Inc, an agribusiness firm, in a programme funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAid).

Fintrac Director Dr Steve New says the Horticultural Development Programme seeks to promote the African Bird's Eye Chilli (*Capsicum frutescens*) to provide an additional source of income to small-scale farmers in dry areas.

Malawi is the world's leading supplier of the chilli followed by Zimbabwe, South Africa, Nigeria and Uganda. The chilli is used as a raw material by pharmaceutical companies to manufacture a wide range of pesticides and anti-rape repellent sprays.

In Asia, consumers use it as an ingredient for curry and other dishes.

To take advantage of the current market openings, Fintrac HDC, in conjunction with local commercial partners, is leading an ambitious effort to develop Kenya as a reliable source of the ABE chillies. It is providing the technical support to farmers.

While introducing the four-year programme to Omega Child

Shelter, a non-governmental organisation, Dr New said 27 lead partner clients, representing more than 400 individual farmers, have transplanted more than 92,000 seedlings.

"The western parts of the country have planted nearly 71,000 seedlings followed by Coast Province (10,000), Rift Valley (7,000) and Central Province (4,000). An average farmer has 500 to 1,000 plants on plots ranging in size from an eighth to a quarter acre," Dr New said.

He said "the interest in ABE chillies is growing as farmers realise that there is a ready market, both locally and internationally, for the crop."

A processing firm based in Eldoret — Mace Foods — has marketing contracts with farmers that include price guarantees.

Dr New said farmers in Western Kenya had signed up to supply Mace Foods with the chilli at the price of Sh100 per kilo of the dried crop. The participating farmers can earn an income ranging from Sh25,000 to Sh80,000 per year. Mace Foods processes dried chilli products for the European market.

"Market demand is growing in European countries. The African Growth and Opportunity Act (Agoa) may also offer good opportunities in the US," Dr New said.

Omega Child Shelter Co-ordinator Mutemi Mutia told Business Sunday that farmers in Kitui and Mwingi were forming groups to benefit from the programme. The groups will be charged with managing the initial nursery seedlings.

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