

Fruits outdo coffee in Muranga

Farmers are earning up to Sh22,000 every month from passion crop

By Isaiah Andebe

A group of coffee farmers in Maragua have found a new cash cow — passion fruits.

Mbari ya Mboce Self Help Group in Kandara Division is supplying the local market with 1.5 tonnes of passion fruits weekly with each of the 32 members taking home an average of Sh22,000 each month. Additionally, according to the group's bank records, they are saving about half a million shillings annually.

"This is much better than what we have been earning from coffee for several years," says Peter Gicheru, the group coordinator. "On a similar piece of land —one acre for each member— I have been earning less than a thousand shillings per year from coffee," he told *Horizon*.

Horticultural farming

The group was established in 1984 as a family welfare society. Their main agricultural crop then was coffee, however, in 2000 the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) introduced passion fruit to the division.

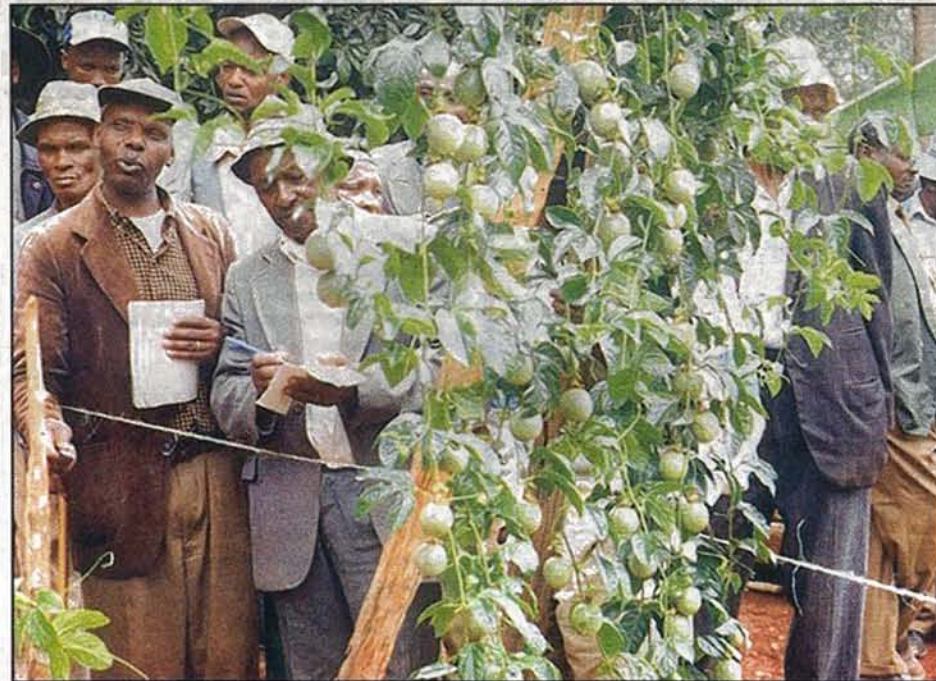
"After a feasibility survey of Kandara Division, Kari recommended it suitable for horticultural farming and especially for passion fruits," says Gicheru.

Consequently, Gicheru offered part of his farm to be used for a pilot phase in passion fruit research and as a training ground for the rest of the group members. "One year later, we were all shocked to see the untapped wealth from our soil," said the coordinator.

Horticulture Development Centre

In 2003 however, the group consulted the Horticulture Development Centre (HDC), a USAID-funded project, for more ideas on the fruit project after KARI had handed over the project to the farmers.

HDC, which is funded by USAID, introduced



Photo/Correspondent

Members of Mbari ya Mboce admire a passion fruit crop during a training session at their field trials plot in Muranga.

new horticultural farming technology to improve on product quality and quantity. "We introduced grafting technology, taught them how to sterilize and analyse soils in order to avoid soil borne pests and diseases. We also taught them various biological pest and disease control methods and above all, we linked them directly to buyers of their produce," says Dr Steve New, HDC director.

HDC did more soil tests and found the area suitable for other horticultural crops, which included

leafy vegetables, tomatoes, table flowers, onions and bananas, crops that were duly introduced.

The farmers were introduced to grafting as a suitable form of propagation. The purple passion fruit variety is recommended to act as the scion while grafting with the rootstock coming from the yellow variety which has been found to resist pests and diseases, and can withstand tough climatic conditions. The purple variety produces high quality fruits that contain a lot of sweet juice.

"The end product from these two combinations is a quality crop containing all the targeted advantages from each variety," explains Joseph Karanja, a grafter.

But also planting comes with other technicalities, for example, before planting the soil is sterilized for between 14 and 21 days. "This is to remove all pest and disease-causing organisms from the soil. It is done by either putting the soil in polythene bags or treating it with a neem tree product," says Dr New.

Finger millet

By last year, says Mr Gicheru, the group had sold 2,572 grafted passion fruit seedlings to markets in Nanyuki, Eldoret, Kirinyaga, Kericho Maragua and Thika. "We used proceeds from these sales to purchase a 5.5 horse power water pump for irrigating this year's crop targeted at 30,000 seedlings," says Gicheru.

To avoid the crop being destroyed by birds during the flowering season, "we encourage farmers to intercrop the fruits with finger millet which is much preferred by birds," says Dr New.

After the first harvest however, the farmers have learned that instead of replanting all over again they simply prune the stalks, and the result —more than doubling the previous crop and at a much shortened period. "Upon planting, we normally start harvesting after 12 months, but after pruning, it comes after three months," explained Gicheru.

Chilli farming

Gicheru is now planning to prune his coffee stems to a lower height, in order to expand his area of horticultural farming. "We have been in coffee farming for years, yet the returns are so little."

Elsewhere HDC has introduced such projects in various parts of the country. In western Kenya, for example, farmers are benefiting from chilli farming, where in the recent months they have been able to deliver 1052 kgs of dried chilli to Mace Foods in Eldoret. Busia, Kisumu and Malindi, farmers are growing vanilla and other spices.