



Malindi farmers shortly to reap fruits of three years wait

Story by: DANIEL NYASSY
Publication Date: 3/21/2008

Small-scale farmers in Malindi might soon be smiling all the way to the bank, thanks to a new agricultural initiative.



Ugandan vanilla expert Umran Kaggwa (right) demonstrates to farmers how the manual pollination of the plant is done. Photo/DANIEL NYASSY

assistance from USAid–Kenya Horticultural Development Programme (KHDP).

While farmers in other parts of the country slash their vines, the Malindi farmers are poised to make a killing from them in a few months.

In fact, they could be earning thousands of shillings before the end of the year; thanks to the vanilla pods they have been pollinating, just in time for the long rains.

“We have planted vanilla since 2005 in this region and very soon we will be making money out of it, says Mr Nathaniel Kubuni of Vitendo group, one of the more than 5,000 Coast smallholders receiving technical

USAid–KHDP and other partners introduced vanilla to the region three years ago, to increase the incomes of smallholders, who previously relied on subsistence production of maize and beans. The vanilla vines have now matured and will produce mature beans in eight months.

Unique character

The most unique characteristic thing about the crop is that pollination has to be done manually before the rains.

A Ugandan expert caused excitement among the farmers attending a training as he manually demonstrated how pollination is done for each plant at the flowering stage.

In addition to vanilla, the smallholders have also been introduced to other crops such as sweet potatoes and mchicha, which provide for their short term food requirements and a cash crop ABE chilli, for export.

“We never miss some money for our daily requirements, thanks to ABE chilli and the sweet potatoes,” says another smallholder, Ms Rose Mwatela.

“KHDP wanted to introduce vanilla at the Coast due to its favourable climate, but also wanted vanilla to fit within the smallholder’s lifestyle.

“Hence the introduction of short term crops that would earn the farmer some income as they wait for vanilla to mature,” says Ms Beatrice Gambo, KHDP manager, Coast region.

Vanilla is a tropical crop that needs high night and day temperatures and heavy rainfall. The best places to grow vanilla in Kenya are the Coast and Lake Victoria basin.

Vanilla needs 50 per cent shade to grow well and this can be provided from mature bananas or tall trees.

Since vanilla is a climbing plant, which grows up the trunk of a tree, it is essential to have suitable support trees on the farm. This has made vanilla ideal for the Coast, whose weather supports a wide range of trees such as the neem, mango and jatropha.

It also discourages deforestation, since growers see the commercial sense to keep the trees.

“Vanilla failed in Central region due to unfavourable climatic conditions,” says Mr Umran Kaggwa, a vanilla expert from Uganda.

Mr Kaggwa is asking farmers to be careful before planting vanilla because “vanilla has its high and low times. At market peaks, farmers can make as much as Sh4,000 a kilogramme and at the low times, as little as Sh150 a kg. Vanilla requires proper planning in order to maximise the profits”.

The first vanilla harvest takes place after three years and on average, a farmer can make 3-4kgs annually from a plant. Harvesting can continue for as long as 15 years with proper management.

There is a great demand for vanilla from local hotels and food companies. Markets are also available in the US and Europe.

KHDP and its partners are working with more than 300 smallholders in Malindi, assisting them with production of vanilla, ABE chilli and sweet potatoes.

Add value

Currently, KHDP and its partners are exploring ways to add value to the vanilla pods before export.

From the excitement among farmers during a recent field day in Msabaha, Malindi, it was apparent that they have embraced the programme.

In Molo, potato farmers will breathe a sigh of relief following the revival of the cold storage and the setting up of a seed multiplication facilities at a cost of Sh40 million.

The State-owned Agricultural Development Corporation took the initiative after persistent lack of certified seeds.

The cold storage plant in Molo, which was established in 1985, but collapsed 10 years later after the machinery was vandalised and some of the farms meant for research grabbed by individuals. The facility was set up with the support of the Dutch government.

According to the managing director of the corporation, Mr William Kirwa, his organisation had to take the challenge to address the lack of the certified seed.

"We needed quick intervention, after it was realised that there were not enough certified potato seeds in the country," he told the *Nation*.

Mr Kirwa said the major problems facing the potato production are low yields attributed to high losses due to diseases, lack of adequate quantities of healthy planting materials, inadequate use of farm inputs and poor agronomic practices.

Farmers, he said, had opted to go for sub-standard crop, which, however, was subject to bacterial wilt attacks. This, he pointed out, was because of the farmers planting infected materials.

Also under the rehabilitation, the MD says, was the grading of the potato seed.

Mr Kirwa said the setting up of the tissue cultural laboratory at the plant will also enhance the multiplication of the various seeds.

Tissue culture

The MD predicts that at the end of next year, the corporation will be able to meet the target of 50,000 tonnes of seed for farmers.

"Majority of the Kenyans eat potato products such as chips, and therefore the market has to be met," he said.

Some of the seed varieties available are Tigoni, Asante, Dutch Robyjn, Kenya Sifa, and Kenya Baraka.

The MD said that Sh20 million would be used to assist farmers produce the seeds.

He said the tissue culture, once in operation, would be among the largest in the country.

In the long term, the laboratory will also multiply seed for farmers interested in flowers such as roses and trees such as eucalyptus.

The research officer at the facility, Ms Judy Ogema, says the plant would complement the one at Kenya Agriculture Research Institute in Tigoni.

Mr Kirwa says the corporation is unable to meet the demands, because of the lack of land, most of which was grabbed during the Kanu regime.

The Government, in an attempt to address the problem of inadequate seed, established a commercial oriented seed programme in 1979.

The ADC was charged with that responsibility including distribution, transport and sales of certified seed potatoes. The sales activities were then undertaken by the Kenya Farmers Association.

Additional reports by Kennedy Masibo