

International markets hungry for Nakuru County herbs

Europe's appetite for basil, a versatile aromatic herb, has opened a window of opportunity for farmers in Nakuru County. The farmers are now earning up to Sh200,000 a month in exports. Working with vegetable seed company, Premier Seeds Limited, the farmers, who have traditionally relied on the overcrowded cereal farming, have now found a lifeline in the perennial herb whose multiple health and nutritional benefits have made it an international hit.



Simon Andys, founder of Premier Seeds, inspects basil in one of the greenhouses.

International buyers say East Africa meets a paltry 15 per cent of their demand for the herb even as markets continue to balloon following discovery of new uses of the herb. "The markets have expressed an insatiable appetite for the herb. With our first farmers, we are producing 1.6 tonnes of basil against a demand six tonnes per month from the importer we work with. The onus is on us to sell us more, the markets keep telling us," said Simon Andys the founder of Premier Seeds.

Financing for basil farmers

To get maximum output that meets international standards, the herb is grown in greenhouses. To assist farmers who might not meet the cost of constructing the greenhouses, Premier Seeds has entered into a financing agreement with financial institutions allowing farmers to own greenhouses which they later pay for in installments from the proceeds of the basil at agreed rates with the financiers.

The financing also caters for the sale of seeds and agronomic support. The farmers grow Premier Seeds Sweet Aroma 3 variety, which belongs to the sweet basil variety, one of the most preferred varieties by chefs globally.

The herb has become an instant hit among Nakuru farmers making an initial foray into horticulture for its ease of cultivation and growth traits. A bushy annual plant, it takes on average 42 days to mature and produces light green silky leaves which tastes somewhat like cloves with a strong pungent and sweet smell. Farmers harvest the leaves after every ten days. A typical greenhouse measuring 8 by 30 meters produces on average 125 kilos of basil every week with a kilo going for Sh390. In a month, a farmer is able to make on average up to Sh180,000. The crop is also a pest and mosquito repellent meaning and is rarely attacked by pests.

Training in farming practices

In a bid to inculcate farmers to farming practices that meets international standards, Premier Seeds has also trained

farmers how to adhere to good agricultural practices like Global GAP and EureGap. Such farming practices include pest management and pesticides use, use of certified propagated materials plus traceability. “We take time to explain to the farmers we are working with, that the export market is very particular about the quality of the produce we sell to them. That will be determined by what they do on the farm. We are glad the farmers have taken this to heart,” said Andys. Buyers also make ad hoc visits to farms to track the growing conditions of the herbs.

Such trainings have assisted farmers in understanding the quality of herbs required for exports. After harvesting, farmers grade and package the herbs on the farm on their own before the herbs are taken to the airport. “The farmers know for example the right leaves and stems required in the international markets. So they do the sorting, grading and packing themselves. They know if they package the wrong quality their produce will be rejected. They have become so good in it that, we have not had any problem with our international buyers,” Andys added.

Other herbs to follow

And as the international markets warm up further to the culinary herb, Premier Seeds is now preparing to work with the farmers to grow another set of herbs including coriander, oregano, lovage, dill and Melissa in the course of the year. “We are responding to market demands. The demand for basil has been meteoric and when the buyers suggested that we should consider growing the other herbs we said why not,” said Andys.

A health-conscious middle class is driving the growth of culinary herbs and spices in the international markets which has been on a meteoric rise and currently stands at \$2.3 billion according to data from the International Trade Center. Key markets include the EU which in 2013 imported 302,000 tonnes of spices and herbs from developing countries like Kenya worth €1 billion.

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