

Banana Farming takes shape in Kirinyaga, set to overtake Coffee

By NJOROGI KABURO

njorogekaburo@gmail.com

Kirinyaga farmers have taken up banana farming as an optional venture after Tea and Coffee.

They have adopted the renowned Tissue culture Banana variety which has a more yield than the conventional bananas.

A report from Ministry of Agriculture in the County revealed that Bananas and dairy farming were fastest growing trades in 2015.

The two were slowly catching up with leading cash crops like tea and coffee.

In 2015 for instance, Dairy injected Sh 2.2 Billion while bananas registered 2.2 billion drawing closer to tea and coffee which earned Sh.4.2 billion and Sh 3.2 billion respectively.

The details were revealed by Agriculture Executive Ngundo Warui during a recent farmers Trade Fair held at Kamweti Agricultural Training Centre.

“Banana farming is gaining momentum at a high rate, more farmers are joining banana farming and according to reports, they are enjoying the returns,” he said.

He said Kirinyaga had become among the leading counties in banana production.

Warui said the County Government of Kirinyaga through the Department of Agriculture has programs that will seek to assist farmers get markets for their produce, both locally and internationally.

“We will also help them exploit banana value addition to enable the farmers realize even better proceeds,” said Warui during a brief to the media.

He urged banana farmers to form groups that will later become a major cooperative society to help them market the bananas as a single unit.

For decades, Tea and Coffee have been the main ingredient in the County’s Economic basket.

But with farmers taking up large scale farming of bananas, the commodity is now slowly closing the margin.

This follows moves by farmers uprooting tea and coffee to replace it with bananas due to the earlier declining in prices.

Florence Wanjiru, the Coordinator of Murindi Fresh Growers Association Self Help Group based in Difathas, a successful banana farmer says she started growing bananas in her $\frac{1}{4}$ acreage 2 years ago harvesting 600 kgs per month but has now grown fortunes by earning Sh. 48,000 per month.

She has since increased the acreage to $\frac{3}{4}$ and she has no regrets.

“I ventured into banana farming in 2014, when I realized that the same acreage I was growing maize would earn me only 18,000 a whole year, I realized it was a tedious affair since in a month I earned almost the same amount of money I earned from maize for the whole year.

To date, Wanjiru is all smiles as her venture never let her down.

The returns from banana business is now footing her all her bills, including putting food on the table and educating her two children; one in Utalii College and another in Kamuiru Secondary.

She says by attending farmer’s exhibitions and Agricultural Society of Kenya’s shows where farmers exchange idea on good crop husbandry, he has managed to grow fortune in her merely an acre land in Difathas.

Wanjiru uses square banana farming technique which she learned during an Exhibition she attended in Kisii.

The Technique grows the bananas in a spacing of 9 by 9 feet which enables them to acquire adequate enough light which is a major component for the growth.

Apart from space, Wanjiru also applies 40 kgs of compost manure per stool annually, this ensures an increased yield.

Among the areas leading in the growth of the TCB include Murinduko, Kangai, Kiangwachi, Ngucui, Karumandi and Kiamugumo.

On the other hand, Kagio market has turned to be a major market trading the commodity in large scale.

Traders as far as from Nairobi, Muranga, and Thika Town are flocking Kagio Market in sought of the much hunted commodity.

Currently, the Murindi group which comprises farmers drawn from Mwea East and Kirinyaga East sells their bananas at Sh15- 18 per kilo depending on demand.

She says the demand drops to Sh15 when fruits like mango and melon are in season.

She grows Grand 9, FIA 17 and Williams banana varieties that are high in demand and do well in the areas.

As she waits for the 18 months for the bananas to mature and be ready for harvest Wanjiru makes maximum use of the land by growing sweet potatoes which she harvests after six months.

Another farmer Erastus Muriuki from Kagumo reckons that Banana-growing “is less labor-intensive and less involving especially after planting.”

“With only three manpower you can plant bananas in a full acre and the harvest you will get will be massive,” observes Muriuki remembering how he uprooted his coffee due to its hectic schedule of planting, spraying, pruning, harvesting, and extra expensed incurred to transport it to the factory.

“With bananas, you only negotiate your price and the buyer harvests and take it away,” he adds.

He says another advantage of bananas is that he uses the banana leaves and stems to make compost manure for his farm.

Christine Mwai, the Inoi ward agricultural extension field officer, advises that to maintain quality harvests, a farmer should keep pruning leaving at least four or five healthy plantlets in each hole.

“If this trend continues Kirinyaga County is set to improve its Economic growth upscaling it through diversification,” pointed out Warui.

It will have joined banana-growing regions like Nyanza, Western, Rift Valley and Coast.



CEC Ngundo Warui (centre) tours exhibitors booth during this year's Farmers Agricultural Trade fare at Kamweti Agricultural Training Center.



Students of Mutira Girls; in Kirinyaga devour cakes made from banana flour during famers Agricultural trade fare held at Kamweti Agricultural Training Centre.