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Banana Business Puts a Smile on Former Tanker Driver's Face

With the fervent to know the emerging agricultural entrepreneurs in Kenya, we meet Mr. Joseph Gitonga a former tanker driver in his Ruiga farm, Central Imenti constituency, off the busy Meru-Embu Highway. He was initially employed as a driver in Mount Kenya region but upon doing trials of growing fruits in his farm in 2000, he saw the huge potential. "I started by growing passion fruits, at that time a kilo was going for Ksh.50 but later dropped in the subsequent years to 25 Shilling in 2004." Mr. Gitonga point outs. The going down of the passion fruit prompted him to endeavor into Banana farming.

Gitonga began growing 50 banana stems in 2005 by breeding both the Kampala type and Cavendish commonly known as "Kasukari"; since they were the most consumed in the local market then. The first seedlings came from Meru Greens Company which helps local farmers in the region to grow

productive and profitable crops.

The first trial seedlings were mainly natural variety and upon noticing that they were doing well, Mr. Gitonga approached Meru Greens Company for further additional seedlings this time the tissue cultured variety. The company gave him the William tissue cultured variety which

performed marvelously, leading him to increasing the acreage to two. His excellent banana farming has prompted notable guests to pay him visit. "On 30th January 2009, Deputy President William Ruto then the Agriculture Minister paid me a visit." Gitonga proudly notes.



The target market for his bananas is Meru Greens which buys a kilo of Kampala bananas for Ksh.25, the Cavendish banana for Ksh. 20 and the William for Ksh.17. From his 2 acre banana farm, Mr .Gitonga presently makes an average of Ksh 100,000 per month from the Kampala type, Ksh 88,000 from the Cavendish banana and Ksh, 80,000 per month from the William variety. In addition, he sells bananas to the neighboring residents. This booming banana business has helped him to pay for his three children education up to the college level.

According to Mr. Gitonga banana production requires a lot of care from the planting period to -the market. "We usually start planting in October during the short rains so that after a period of 14 months the crop is ready for harvesting," he indicated.

The former tanker driver uses cow dug manure and 17-17 fertilizer as his inputs in his banana farm. The manure is usually applied once a year, and with adequate water supply the crop is usually ready within 14 months. On the contrary, with insufficient

water supply the banana crop takes 18 months to mature. The location of Joseph's farm has a good supply of water though there is shortage in September during the dry spell. He uses overhead irrigation method.

The spacing for the crop should be three plants in one hole. "There is a team of experts from Sweden that paid us a visit, courtesy of Meru Greens and taught us that the correct spacing for bananas is to plant the grandmother plant, the mother and the daughter in one hole so that when one reproduces you harvest and then you go to the next crop the following season as the previous one matures up and the cycle continues," he shared. The range of spacing from one hole to the other should be 12fts by 12fts and 2 ½fts by 2fts by width and the depth respectively.

On the part of shortcomings, the Banana wilt and Banana weevil lets him down from achieving his full potential. However with the use of Juanco SPS limited products such as Marshal and Phosphates the crop



is doing well in terms of production. The pesticides are normally poured around the stem with 200mls mixed with 20 litres of water.

Gitonga looks forward to yielding more bananas in the nearby future and advises farmers to intercrop the natural and tissue cultured banana varieties to achieve better yield.

