



Lady expertise in Growing Lady's Fingers

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Mboga Tuu has a lot of experience in growing vegetables. In our previous issues we featured their main plant eggplant, Karella and Chillies. In this issue we feature Okra a flowering plant in Mallow (*Malvaceae*) family that is closely related to cotton plant and hibiscus.

Okra is a pretty, heavily foliated plant which grows up to a height of approximately 2 metres and has big yellow or white flowers.

It is grown for its green pods which resemble the fingers of a lady; no wonder its name 'lady's finger' which rightly describes its delicate and feminine nature.

Its origin is disputable, with some supporting South Asia others Ethiopia and others West Africa. It is referred as Okra in United States, a cognate of okwuru the name it is known by in Nigeria, Igbo language. In other parts of the world, it is known as okoro, bamia, bhindi and also gumbo in Southern United States which is apparently its Kiswahili name.

According to Daniel Agawo, Mboga Tuu farms Group General Manager, the plant do well when planted 10 -15cm apart with DAP (Diammonium phosphate) and top dressed with CAN (calcium ammonium nitrate).

They can be planted two rows in a raised bed. However, CAN should be applied only in soils with acid or neutral soil pH. In alkaline soils sulphate of ammonia (SA) should be used.

Urea is an alternative to CAN but it should be applied only in moist soils with a pH 8 or higher as high volatilisation of ammonia could occur.

Fertilisers containing chlorides should be avoided, since okra is sensitive to salinity. Quantities of the fertilizers to be used will depend upon soil analysis results for the blocks in question.

"The main challenge is getting the right seeds; many farmers have burned their fingers by planting wrong seeds, one should order seeds from reputable companies. Most of our clients order for the deep green fingers of 5 definite spines free from bruises and we have to get the right seeds". Said Daniel as he introduced us to Nisha, an out grower contracted to grow lady's finger for Mboga Tuu just next to their Isinya Farms.

Okra grows well in tropical and relatively warmer regions with well-drained soils. In Kenya it is year round grown at Kajiado, Yatta, Kibwezi and Magadi regions. The plant is sown directly in the field through direct seeding. Thorough ground preparation prior to planting is recommended. Gap filling is done after one week to 10 days.



Nisha who formerly worked with Irrico International and PJ Dave among others; gained interest in farming after she got convinced that what she was telling clients, especially when selling greenhouses during demonstrations was feasible and there was gain in it.

She would take people to farm sites and this is when she got motivated even though none of their family members is a farmer. "Farming is very challenging especially at the beginning but I find it very fulfilling" she said as she jovially took us round her farm located about 5 kilometers from Isinya.

At the farm she has planted tomatoes, onions, watermelons and chillies; but it is the healthy looking lady's finger in different stages that made us appreciate that 'what men can do, ladies can do it even better'.

She has employed a number of people to look after the farm and at one field ladies were picking the okra pods which she told us they are harvested twice daily depending on the temperatures. "The plant will continue to produce flowers at the internodes which will within no time become fruits as long as they are harvested, they are getting moisture and nutrients required. The hot Isinya weather is very appropriate for the lady's finger" she said gazing to the scorching sun.

Due to market sensitivity, the surface of the fingers should not be touched since this removes the tiny hairs making the fruit to lose glamour and darken the skin. To avoid this, Nisha told us that they handle the pods at the stalk where they are snapped.

The harvested pods are allergic to cold and freezing though they stay a couple of days before they can be spoiled; they should be harvested within a day to marketing.

When cut the fibrous pods contain round white seeds, releases a sticky substance with thickening properties and is used in stews and soups or for salads. It is a powerhouse source of vitamin C, low in calories and is fat-free. Perhaps it is the nutritional value that has made the fruit popular particularly with the Indians dosa and Pilau.

At Nisha's farm she crop rotates lady's finger with baby corn, chilli and onions or any other of brassicas family. She controls weeds by hand hoeing. "We control sting bugs - that stings the



fingers leaving them with pimples at flowering stage using systemic and repellent insecticides" said Daniel.

"Wet weather is a challenge to the crop since it is highly vulnerable to powdery mildew and leaf spots. We use sulphur based fungicides and other broad spectrum curative fungicidal (Triazols) sprays to cure" Daniel

answered when asked about the pests and diseases that affect lady's finger.

"There is a huge market since the import from India is threatened in Europe, so there is high demand" Daniel noted.

