



Escapades with Watermelons

When I got into farming, it was to escape city life, sleep under the stars and nurture plants. What I didn't realize was that city life is hard to get away from, especially now that Smartphones bring the internet to you across the country. Part of me also wanted to keep links I have in the city so that I don't get too lost in the countryside.

Thus my journey to being a young connected farmer begun and so far I can say it's been a ride and a half. Though I find that the things I am doing off the farm seem to be more fruitful than those on the farm, part of which I guess has to do with the fact that I am just beginning to learn what farming entails.

My last or should I say current season is of watermelons. I planted these in time with the April long rains. To begin with, I didn't get a tractor to plough my three acres; I think the fact that I am 12km from Kitengela and

another 7 Km from the tarmac makes it hard for commercial tractors to come and plough in our neighbourhood. Even though there are two commercial farms within 2km of my farm and both have tractors, they are either not allowed to plough outside of their farms or driven by poorly skilled drivers.

I say this because last season I hired one of the tractors to plough for me and they did such a shoddy job that they left ditches along the slope of the farm and they never came back to do harrowing despite my repeated requests. This is not withstanding the fact that I was paying for the services.

So when this season started, I didn't even bother calling them, I went to Isinya which is about 8km away and I was still not successful in convincing any of the tractor operators there to come over. They would request that I find another

farmer or farmers and organize with them such that when the tractor comes over, it will plough at least 10-15 acres in total. They didn't deem it profitable to come all that way only for my 3

acres. This proved hard to organize because most of my neighbours have small pieces of land that they have cultivated and some could not afford the fee charged. So I left that pursuit alone





and decided to plant my melons by just ploughing lightly with jembes. This is one of the reasons why I decided to assist a local self-help group to apply for a grant from an International NGO to purchase a community tractor that they can be using at subsidized rates and not continue suffering the burden of physical labour through tilling with jembes.

Anyway, I digress. I planted the melons on 4th April just when the rains were beginning to pound hard. We planted the seeds at a rate of 3-4 per hole and at a distance of 1 meter between plants and 2 meters between rows. As planting fertilizer, I used about 20Kg of D.A.P and organic goat and sheep manure. We did some

weeding ten days later as the shoots were coming out of the ground. Once they started to run i.e. spread horizontally, I put dry grass at the base of the plants and created some mounds so that they could keep water around the base of the plant. I came to learn later that the plant is watered even on the running ends not just at the base.

When I noticed some aphids beginning to attack the plants, I started spraying them. This was about a month from planting. I had some left over Alphacypermethrin pesticide. It is after two sprays that I realized that the aphids were not subsiding. I called on some help and was advised to change the pesticide. At the time, I didn't know that pests

can develop resistance to the chemicals like these had. This was about a month later, after some severe infestation, that I changed the pesticide to Methogun.

During this period of infestation, the watermelons also suffered two weeks without water due to a breakage of my neighbour's borehole pump. He supplies my farm with water and during this period, I could do nothing but wait for the repair work to get finished. It was an excruciating period.

It was exacerbated a month later when out of the blue he cut off supply claiming I pay him a connection fee which he had previously waived. The melons went for another week without water as I gathered the money to pay him rather than argue with his cold hearted manoeuvre at a time when the melons were most vulnerable.

Despite these challenges, on the 12th of July, I harvested the first 10 watermelon fruits which I shared around with my neighbours as a thanksgiving. The rest

of the melons are still about two weeks from maturing. That's another thing I have come to learn about melons, they don't all grow at the same rate. The aphids attack also slowed down the plants as did the lack of water. Some plants were not strong enough and died off but the ones I managed to salvage started sprouting afresh.

What I have is the ordinary Sugar Baby variety of watermelons- the dark green ones. For the next season, I will use the hybrid F1 varieties which cost Kshs. 21,000 a Kilo. The regular variety cost me Kshs. 3,500. A kilo of seeds can take you 3 acres.

In terms of output, the regular variety gives you 6-8 tonnes per acre while the hybrid F1 can give you 10-12 tonnes per acre.

If there is anything I have learnt in these three months I have tendered these melons is that one; it is good to have your own source of water as a farmer, and two; always alternate the chemicals that you use as pesticides lest they develop resistance to them.

