Farmers count losses as striga weed invades Masindi gardens

Farmers urge the government and stakeholders to intervene.

BY STEVEN WANDERA

Farmers in Masindi District are battling a severe invasion of striga weed, a parasitic plant that has drastically reduced crop yields and now threatens food security and household incomes across the district.

Striga, commonly known as witchweed, attacks cereal crops such as maize, rice, sorghum, and sugarcane by attaching itself to plant roots and siphoning nutrients, leading to stunted growth and poor harvests. Farmers say production has collapsed despite heavy investment in fertilisers, herbicides, and labour.

Mr Kanaginagi Ateenyi Rutindo, a maize and sugarcane farmer from Bokwe Village, said the weed has invaded and destroyed his crops.

"I used to harvest 10 bags of maize from one acre, but since the invasion of striga, yields have dropped to as low as two bags, even after applying fertilisers and following recommended agronomic practices," Mr Kanaginagi said.

He added that farmers are incurring heavy losses after investing in inputs, only to harvest very little.

"Today, agriculture requires a lot of money. You invest in fertilisers and herbicides, but because of striga, you end up getting nothing. This is pushing farmers into losses, poverty, and hunger," Mr Kanaginagi said.

He added that attempts to control the weed using non-selective herbicides have failed, describing striga as highly resistant.

"We call upon scientists to research and come up with effective herbicides that can kill striga. Otherwise, we may be forced to abandon agriculture altogether, which will result in hunger and extreme poverty," Mr Kanaginagi warned.

Similar frustrations were echoed by Mr Simon Omara, a resident of Kasenyi Village, whose maize crop was wiped out last season.

"I cultivated two acres of maize expecting about 30 bags, but I only harvested 10 because of striga. I tried spraying different chemicals, but all was in vain," Mr Omara said.

He appealed to the Ministry of Agriculture to intervene by providing effective chemicals and technical support.

Sugarcane farmers have also not been spared. Mr John Tusiime from Pakanyi Sub-County said: "I planted two hectares of sugarcane expecting good returns, but my cane is now stunted because of striga. I feel hopeless and appeal to the government to help us address this problem."

Mr Tadeo Wabyona, the manager of Gukwatamanzi Farmers' Cooperative Society Ltd, said striga seeds can survive in the soil for many years, making eradication extremely difficult.

"The weed affects cereals such as maize, rice, sorghum, and sugarcane and has negatively impacted many farmers in the district," he said.

He said the cooperative group is training farmers to uproot and burn the weed before it flowers to prevent seed spread.

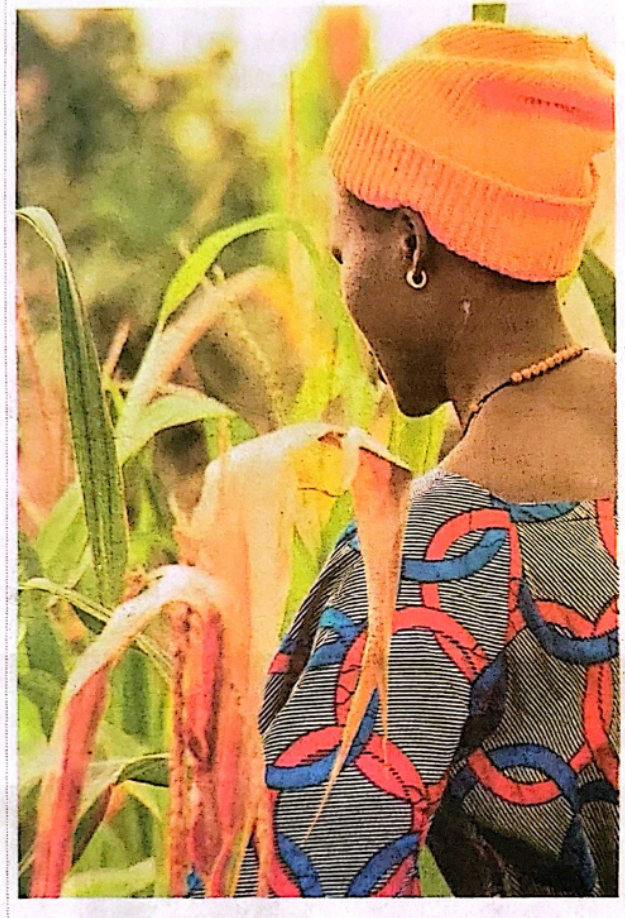
Mr Francis Byamukama, the cooperative's programmes manager, advised farmers to reduce cereal production in affected areas and adopt crop rotation.

"We encourage farmers to rotate with oilseed crops such as soybeans and sunflowers, which are less affected by striga and help reduce its multiplication," he said.

He also called on the government to deploy more agricultural extension workers to educate farmers on pest and weed control.

Ms Sheila Kyomuhendo, a field officer at Plant Village Uganda, emphasised early planting as a key control measure.

"When farmers plant early, crops are stronger before striga germinates. Late planting makes crops more vulnerable. Early planting is critical in fighting this weed," she said.



A woman in a maize garden. Scientists say the parasitic plant known as striga, or witchweed, is a challenging weed to crops like maize, millet and sorghum.

ABOUT STRIGA AND CONTROL MEASURES

Masindi District Agricultural Officer Job Byaruhanga said striga remains a major challenge, particularly for maize farmers. "Maize productivity has greatly reduced, and some farmers have abandoned maize farming and shifted to other crops."

He warned that failure to control the weed could lead to food shortages and rising poverty. "Masindi has been a food basket for the region. If this problem is not addressed, hunger and poverty will worsen," Mr Byaruhanga warned.

He said the district is implementing interventions such as farmer sensitisation and field monitoring, urging farmers to regularly inspect their fields and uproot the weed before flowering.

Mr Byaruhanga further, explained that once the striga matures, control becomes difficult because its seeds are tiny and easily spread through animals, farm tools, and the movement of seedlings between gardens.

He also revealed that the Ministry of Agriculture is conducting research and crop breeding to develop varieties resistant to parasitic weeds such as striga.



A farmer inspects his maize garden with striga weed (with purple flowers) in Masindi District. PHOTO/STEVEN WANDERA