



A FARMER'S SAY >

By Michael J. Ssali

Do we need new coffee varieties?

The *Seeds of Gold* magazine last week released news that the National Agricultural Research Organisation in collaboration with breeders at National Coffee Research Institute (NaCORI), Kituuza in Mukono District, had introduced new robusta coffee varieties that are resistant to the dreaded Coffee Wilt Disease (CWD).

The yield potential of the new varieties was also said to double that of the current varieties. The magazine further revealed that so far small-holder farmers have been harvesting between 10 and 15 bags per acre of the current varieties against 50 bags per acre, the yield potential of the new varieties.

This is however not the first time that our researchers have come up with improved robusta coffee varieties.

In the 80s they developed some six high-yielding cloned robusta coffee varieties. Only a few years ago the same research organisations developed CWD tolerant robusta coffee varieties.

It is good practice for a country like Uganda to breed crop varieties that are suited to its specific climate and crop management systems in order to develop a unique national crop that can be branded and marketed as such.

Uganda is gifted with favourable coffee farming conditions and research institutions are mandated to develop improved varieties and disease control techniques.

However, according to the recently released Uganda National Coffee Strategy (UNCS) document (2015/16 - 2019/20), the CWD epidemic which first emerged in 1993 has destroyed 56 per cent of Robusta trees in the country.

This big loss and other factors that involve planting of low quality varieties have stagnated coffee production in Uganda at 3.8 million (60kilogramme) bags per annum since the late 90s.

Our national target according the UNCS is to raise our annual production to 6 million bags in the next five years. The plan for achieving this target includes planting more coffee trees and increased field extension services to farmers.

Most surprisingly, however, the coffee varieties being given out to farmers under such projects as Wealth Creation are not the type that has been prepared by NARO and NaCORI.

They are susceptible to the deadly CWD and their yield capacity is not guaranteed.

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