

For the fourth year running, Vision Group together with the Embassy of the Netherlands, KLM Airlines, dfcu Bank and Koudjis Animal Nutrition, is running the best farmers' competition. The 2018 competition will run from February to November, with the awards in December. Every week, Vision Group platforms will publish profiles of the farmers. Winners will walk away with sh150m and a fully paid-for trip to the Netherlands

By Wilson Asilimwe

When Maj. Alex Baguma acquired land in Nombwe sub-county in Ntoroko district 25 years ago, he did not think he would reap big from it. As Uganda People's Defence Forces' liaisons officer under the Operation Wealth Creation programme in the agriculture ministry, he rallies his people in developmental ventures such as farming. "He also practises what he preaches. When you practise agriculture, you have to be very patient, otherwise, you might not be able to withstand the occasional disappointments on timeline some of these trees and crops take," he says.

How he started

Maj. Baguma is one of the farmers in the Rwenzori region that reaped the rich harvests of the vanilla boom right from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. He then went in full throttle. "I started growing vanilla in the late 1990s with 50 plants. A kilo at the time went for sh6,000 and I earned sh120,000 from one plant," Baguma recalls. He says when vanilla prices fell in the early 2000s, many farmers abandoned the crop, but endured.

A kilogramme of green vanilla beans now goes for between sh200,000 and sh250,000, up from sh100,000-sh150,000 two years ago. About a decade ago, the price of vanilla, which had reached sh150,000 a kilogramme of green beans, nosedived to almost sh1,000. However, in 2014, it started rising with a kilo ranging from sh2,500 to sh5,000.

At the moment, vanilla is the second most expensive item per kilogramme at the world market after gold.

"Many farmers are now rushing to buy vanilla vines to plant. As a result of the increased demand, the price of two-foot vines is sh5,000 up from sh1,500," Baguma says.

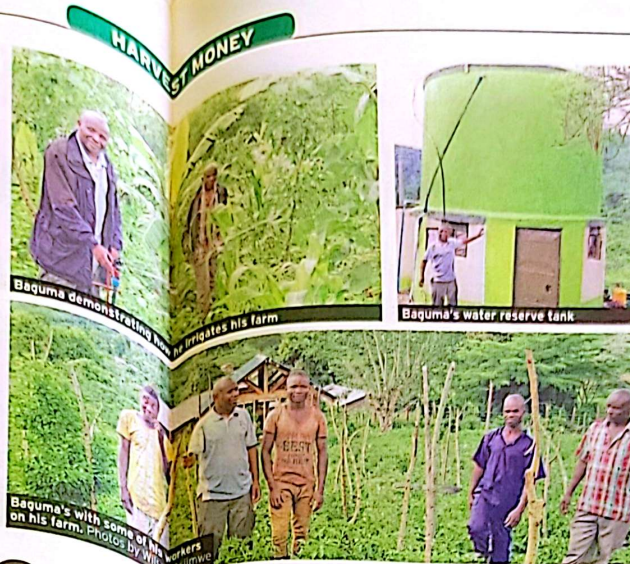
Mixed farmer

On his farm are trees that are good for timber, firewood and, therefore, marketable. However, Baguma is more concerned about preserving the environment than making a buck.

Baguma says he grew trees because they are good cover for the garden which ensures the preservation of soil moisture. The trees also act as air conditioners. The leaves



Baguma in his 10-acre vanilla plantation



Baguma demonstrating how he propagates his farm

Baguma's water reserve tank

Baguma with some of his workers on his farm. Photos by Wilson Asilimwe

SOLDIER MAKES A KILLING FROM VANILLA

Propagation, planting and harvesting vanilla

Dr Gabriel Musinguzi, an agricultural expert, says vanilla crop is propagated by shoot cuttings. After selecting the planting material, there are two options: one is long and short cuttings.

"Long cuttings start flowering in second year. Short cuttings take three years to flower. However, long cuttings have slow growth when compared to the short ones. It is up to the farmer to judge the cutting length depending on the availability of strong health and actively growing vines should be selected as planting material in cultivation. Short cuttings, preferably having 8-10 nodes, should be selected as these flower earlier than the short cuttings," Musinguzi says.

He says the plant only flowers for six-week period per year. Additionally, the flowers only last approximately one day. This means

one needs to keep a close eye on the plant, checking it daily for flowers. When it does flower, you will need to hand-pollinate the flowers to grow the vanilla beans. It is best to pollinate the flowers in the morning, around 10:00am.

Push the pollen mass out and hold it up with your right thumb and index finger. Use your middle finger to push the anther back and expose the cap underneath it, which serves as a shield. Place the pollen on the ridge. Push the ridge back into place with your left hand and pull the cap back down. Repeat with all the flowers.

Harvesting and storing vanilla

The pods will appear within two months of pollination, but they take six to nine months to mature. During this time, care for the plant as you normally would. Then, when the pods, normally green, are just

starting to turn yellow, carefully pluck them off the plant.

Blanch the vanilla
Heat a pot of water to 158 °F (70 °C) so that the vanilla does not lose its hot water for two to three minutes. Kill any germs or bacteria, and also prepares the beans for curing. Sweat the beans for curing. hours in a blanket-lined box. After to a box lined with a blanket. A are best, but you can use whatever you have at hand. Allow the beans to "sweat" inside the blankets and them. The beans will sweat out moisture due to the heat, helping them to dry out. Alternatively, one can dry the

beans in the sun and sweating them for between seven and 14 days.

Spread your beans on trays and place them in direct sunlight for three hours each day. Then, fold them in a cloth or blanket and put them in a box to allow them to sweat overnight. Repeat the process of drying and sweating each day until the pods turn deep brown.

Allow the beans to air dry for eight-20 days at 35°C and 70% humidity. It is advised that the farmer measures the room temperature. To further remove moisture from the beans, they should be allowed to air dry fully. Hang them up or spread them out on trays in a drying room.

Keep the room at 35 °C and 70% humidity for best results. The beans are done drying when they have a soft, leathery texture and lots of wrinkles length-wise.

which he says he earns over sh100m per harvest.

Baguma says he has constructed a coffee processing plant on his farm. "I have already set up a coffee factory and installed a bigger generator to run the machines because my area is not connected to the national power grid. I also buy coffee from other farmers in my area and process it," he says.

"I dry my coffee and process it because I have a coffee processing machine which removes the husks at my farm. I then sell it to exporters at the prevailing market prices," he says.

Baguma sells his vanilla and coffee to exporters in Kampala who buy directly from his farm.

"I do not look out for market for my products at present time," he says.

PRODUCTS

Vanilla is used for making baking powder, ice cream, food flavours, paste, powder, sugar, extract and syrup.

Vanilla is much more than a delicious flavour ingredient in baked goods. It has a number of other medicinal benefits including treating acne, improving hair growth, speeds up healing, reducing inflammation and preventing chronic diseases.



Vanilla ice cream



Vanilla sugar

to my farm and buy the produce. I do not incur any costs in transporting products," he says.

Last season, he sold a kilogramme of coffee at sh5,600, earning about sh40m. He invested all the money back in the

Farm practices

Baguma says when he was starting, he did not know that vanilla required shade and supporting trees and the first plants on his farm withered. When he realised the mistake, he planted supporting trees to the vines and intercropped vanilla with bananas which provide shade.

"The vanilla plant should be allowed to trail horizontally on poles tied to trees after trailing to height of 1.5m-2.0m. I planted bananas which help to give shade to my vanilla," he says.

Baguma sprays his vanilla to prevent pests and diseases from attacking the crop.

He says vanilla and coffee need good storage facilities in order not to compromise their quality. He has constructed a storage facility.

"I have constructed a modern drier because vanilla and coffee need good post-harvest handling facilities. If your produce is poor quality, you will lose on the market," Baguma says.

Christine says they use the coffee husks in mulching and they have dug contours to control soil erosion.

"We have also planted trees around the farm in order to mitigate the effects of climate change. We also give out free tree seedlings to residents around the farm," Christine adds.

Baguma says most of the risks associated with coffee are pests and diseases and in order to mitigate them he sprays his garden regularly.

"For vanilla, the biggest threat we have are thieves. They even harvest premature vanilla beans, but we have employed watchmen with spears," Baguma adds.

Increasing knowledge on the farm
Baguma says in order to increase his knowledge, he visits other farmers in different districts and has never missed attending Harvest Money expos in Namboole. "I have visited farmers in Kayunga, Mukono, Buikwe and many other parts. I also attend expos where I interact with different farmers to share ideas," he says.

Christine says the family has hired an agricultural extension worker to train some of the workers on the farm.

Social impact
Baguma says many community members visit his farm to learn some of the best farming practices and he also gives them vines.

He has supplied over 100 farmers with free vanilla vines which they have planted last year and they are learning from him. "I also encourage my workers to plant vanilla on the little pieces of land they own because it does not require a lot of land," he says.

"The communities have also benefited from his services because he helps to train them in good farming practices," Christine says.

What others say

Clovise Busunge, a resident of Karugutu in Ntoroko:

Baguma has inspired many of us into farming and the use of modern technology to benefit from agriculture. We go to his farm and he is always willing to share with us ideas. I got vines from his farm which I have planted.

Beatrice Kabugho, a resident of Nombwe in Ntoroko:

He has given us jobs. I work on his farm and get money to take care of my family. He has also provided us part of his land where we are planting our own crops and benefit from the water which he pumps from the river.

sub-county will benefit from the water," Baguma says.

Baguma is also constructing a fish pond at his farm and he says that he will stock over 20,000 fingerlings.

FRAUD ALERT

Do not be duped! Entering the Best Farmers' competition is free-of-charge and journalists are facilitated to write the stories.

The winners are not chose by an individual, but by a panel of distinguished judges of integrity. If any asks for money from you feature in the competition