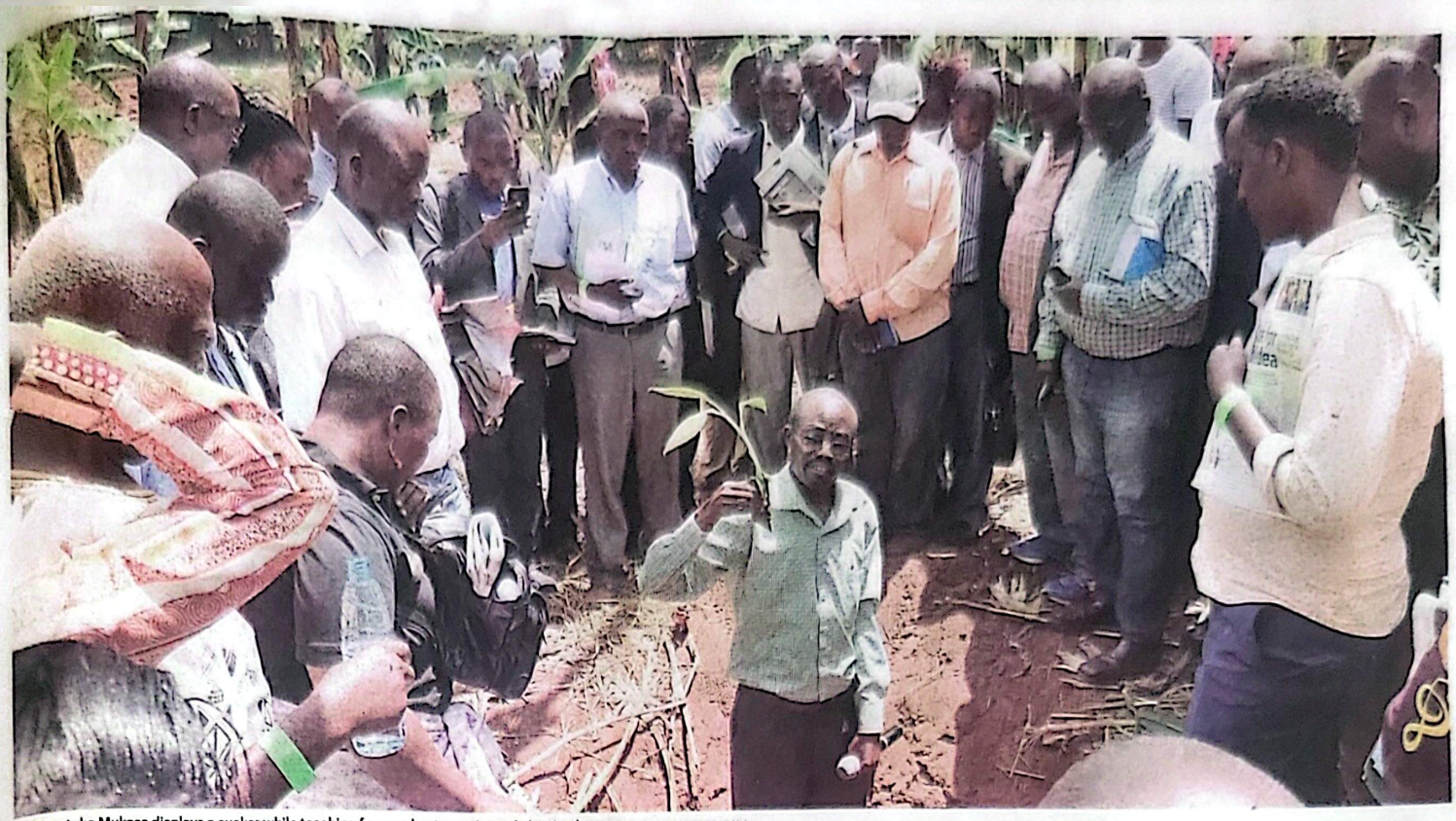

Prof Ssetuba Mukasa displays a sucker while teaching farmers best practices of planting banana. PHOTO BY ALEX ESAGALA

Managing your banana plantation

Bananas grow well in areas with rich, dark, fertile soils, plenty of mulch and organic matter, nitrogen and potassium. However, more is required to sustain a healthy plantation. **Beatrice Nakibuuka** helps you explore how best to plant and care for your banana plantation.

However small your piece of land, it is possible to have a thriving banana plantation and reap big from the enterprise.

Unlike experienced farmers with established banana plantations, there are fresh entrants with intentions to start new plantations. This December would be good timing for one to start especially if one has already identified the area where one wants to set up a plantation.

Preparation

According to Moses Lumu, an agronomist and agricultural consultant, slashing during the dry season is timely because it is easy to control weeds in the dry season than when done in the rainy season. Lumu says slashing the field in the rainy season may take a lot of time and labour which will increase the costs. Ploughing is advisable only if you intend to intercrop the bananas.

Lumu advises a farmer to dig holes which are 3X3m or 10X10 ft spread for marked spacing between the plants. The farmer could opt to use either metres or feet to avoid confusion.

The holes should be 2X2 and 2X3 ft for depth and width respectively depending on the amount of space one has.

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NUMBER OF MONTHS BANANA TAKES TO FLOWER

"The holes can be filled with plant material and cow dung at the end of the dry season. The plant material and cow dung help to increase soil nutrients to prepare it for the new crop. When it starts raining, this is the opportune time for the farmer to start planting," Lumu says.

Soil

All bananas require deep, well drained loam soil with high humus content. They best grow in soil pH ranging from about 5.6-7.5. They do not tolerate acidic soil. The crop needs an adequate supply of potassium, nitrogen, magnesium, calcium and phosphorus.

Planting

Arthur Okiror, a farmer, says there are several local banana types and the choice of variety depends on the farmer's preference.

The varieties have different names depending on the location but the commonly known in the central region are *Musakala*, *Kisansa*, *Mbwazirume*, and *Mpologoma* among others.

The farmer should only take suckers from vigorous banana plants. The suckers should have small, spear-shaped leaves and should be about four feet high. If they are smaller than this, they may take longer to fruit and the first bunch will be smaller.

"The farmer should be very careful about the tools used during the trimming of the suckers because if some suckers are infected with pests and diseases, they will infect the rest of the garden since you are using the same tools to trim and plant the suckers," Okiror says.

He therefore advises that the suckers be trimmed and dipped in pesticides before they are planted to prevent the spread of disease and pests.

The young plantation

In the early stages, the most common cause of death for banana suckers is lack of water. Ensure to keep your banana plants moist but not too wet because they may rot.

Also, it is important to keep away the weeds because they compete with the plants for nutrients and space.

If you are intercropping, ensure to provide nutrients for the intercrops or the bananas may not have enough nutrients as the intercrops deplete them from the soil.

Okiror says, "Remove all the dead leaves and use them as mulch if you did not intercrop. As you mulch, ensure that the mulch material is not too close to the banana mat because this may encourage the breeding of pests and diseases as well as birth of more young ones."

For ample spacing, you need about three suckers for every mat in the garden. Cut off any big leaves from the suckers because they do not need them.

SIGNS OF GOOD SUCKER

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Banana suckers ready for planting

The fruiting stage

Depending on the weather and variety of the banana you planted, you may see your first flower after about six months or more. Leave the leaves around it because they protect the top bend of the stalk from sun scorching. As the purple flower petals curl back and drop off, the banana fingers start coming out.

There are various diseases that affect bananas but the most common in Uganda is the Banana Bacterial Wilt which literally causes withering of the plant especially at the fruiting stage. Also, watch out for nematodes and weevils in your banana plantation.

After the last cluster of bananas has been revealed, Lumu advises, that the farmer cuts off the bell (bunch of purple flower petals at the end) to prevent the spread of the Banana Bacterial Wilt which is usually spread by the pollinators such as bees.

After the flowering, it may take another three months for the bunch to mature so you need to support the plant with a prop because it becomes very heavy. The bunch can snap off or pull the whole plant down before it matures. A good prop would be a long, strong stick with a u-shaped hook at the end.

Intercrop plants

Intercropping your bananas is a good idea to enable you get earnings even before you reap from the banana.

Some of the crops that are suitable to be intercropped with bananas include legumes, tomatoes, cabbage, pineapple and pumpkins which can be grown for one or two seasons before your bananas start fruiting. Beyond the two seasons, the intercrops may not yield much.

Lumu advises a farmer to provide nutrients for these crops so that they do not have to compete with the bananas for the same or drain the soil of the nutrients because this will lower your banana yield.

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