

Rwanda set to earn huge profits from essential oils

RWANDA
Gahara

Inside a metal shed in southeastern Rwanda, Nicholas Hitimana brandished a plastic container holding a green liquid: geranium essential oil, freshly distilled and ready for export at more than \$200 for a kilogramme.

The pioneer of essential oils in Rwanda, Hitimana said he understood over a decade ago "the need to develop high-value crops" in his hilly nation of just 2.6 million hectares.

Agriculture accounts for nearly a third of GDP and employs four-fifths of the population and, as a result, there is "little arable land" remaining.

"On a hectare, if we grow beans, we earn about \$2,000 a year, whereas if we grow geranium, the income can reach \$6,000 or even \$8,000," Hitimana says.

The trained agronomist embodies Rwanda's ambition of diversifying its agriculture and increasing the value of exports by getting into the lucrative global market for essential oils. To this end, Hitimana has been importing geraniums from South Africa since 2004.

At the time the flower was virtually unknown in Rwanda, but Hitimana was convinced of the "great potential" of the essential oil sector.

Four crops a year

"In South Africa there can only be two harvests a year, but here, as there is no winter, it is possible to get up to four crops a year," says Hitimana, whose company Ikirezi Natural Products has since grown and diversified.

With 25 hectares of plantations, it produces 1,000kg of essential oils derived from patchouli, lemon grass and eucalyptus as well as geraniums. The oils are exported to Canada, South Africa, the US and elsewhere for use in the



A woman works in a field of geranium plants in Gahara in the southeast of Rwanda in April

Essential oils are on demand in richer countries for use in cosmetics, food and pharmaceuticals

perfume industry.

The company employs 70 farmers. "At first, it was not easy to convince them to abandon subsistence for commercial agriculture," he says, adding the work is more precise than growing beans.

"We need to plant on time, manure on time, hoe, turn the soil, irrigate and harvest on time", or risk a "drastically" reduced yield, Hitimana says, noting that it takes between 600-1,000kg of geraniums to produce a single

kilogramme of oil.

Last year, Rwanda exported around 14 tonnes of essential oils — geranium, moringa, patchouli and tagetes — bringing in \$473,000, according to the National Agricultural Export Development Board.

Rwanda is also cultivating pyrethrum, used in natural insecticides.

Growth market

According to the India-based firm Market Research Future (MRFR),

essential oils are increasingly in demand in richer countries for use in cosmetics, food and pharmaceuticals. The world market is forecast to grow by 7% between 2017 and 2022, says MRFR.

To get its share of the cake, Rwanda opened an essential oil laboratory three years ago, the first of its kind in the region, allowing quality control.

"One of the main challenges facing Rwanda is a growing trade deficit and a limited number of competitive companies that can meet regional and international export standards," says Patience Mutesi, Rwanda director for TradeMark East Africa, which promotes regional trade and helped fund the lab project.

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