Reviving passion fruit production in Kenya

Kenya exported passion fruit in the 90s and early 2000s, however, due to pest management challenges, the country has seen a decline in the production of the highly profitable crop since 2003 - this despite Kenya's potential to grow and export passion fruit.



Elijah Langat, passion fruit farmer (Image Supplied)

The Fresh Produce Exporters Association of Kenya Chairman Apollo Owuor told a gathering of farmers, buyers and development partners at a conference titled *Making Kenya the Global Leader in Passion Fruit Production and Marketing*, Kenya produced and exported the fruits in the 90s and early 2000 but since 2003, decline in production started because of pest management challenges.

The European market has strict guidelines on pesticides residues and passion fruit was reported to contain these above the allowable limits.

He added there have not been efforts to revive the industry partly because passion fruit is listed by the Ministry of Agriculture as a minor horticultural crop therefore not in government policy for priority. The Agriculture Food Authority Horticulture Directorate head Zakayo Magara admitted passion fruit is listed under 100 other minor crops.

Upgrading passion fruit from a minor to a major crop

Following the day-long deliberations, the Council of Governors Agriculture Committee, represented by Anne Koech, county executive committee member in charge of agriculture, Kericho, made a commitment to propose and support the upgrading of the crop to a major so that funds can be allocated to the development of passion fruit in counties earmarked as suitable to grow it. She said the county governments would subsidise purchasing of seedlings to improve production and create market linkages to streamline marketing in the Western region, considered as a high potential passion fruit production zone.

According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that funded the conference through the Kenya Agriculture Value Chains Enterprises (Kaves), passion fruit can grow anywhere in Kenya due to the availability of varieties for warmer and colder parts of the country.

“We have yellow passion fruit for the lower, warmer regions and the more common purple variety for the higher cooler parts,” said Dr Steve New, Kaves chief of party.

Kenya's potential to be a leader in tropical juice production

He added there is potential for Kenya to be a world leader in tropical juice production due to year-round availability of tropical fruits – passion, mango and pineapple, as the only country in the world that can grow the crops continuously.

Passion fruit is the most profitable in comparison with other crops, according to the Passion Fruit Value Chain Study undertaken in 2015 by Dr Hezekiah Agwara which indicates a farmer can make a good income from a small parcel of land measuring 0.3 - 0.6 of an acre. New describes this as “poverty level minimum” that can sustain a livelihood.

He added nothing goes to waste from a passion fruit plant. “Minimal wastage in passion fruit production because there is a huge domestic market. Passion fruit is also used by processors for juice while neighbouring Uganda is a big market for Kenyan passion fruit, taking 50% of total production. South Sudan is also buying lots of passion fruit from Kenya.



Global food import bill set to rise, boost in tropical fruit exports likely

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New stresses that passion fruit is best produced by smallholders due the attention it requires for maximum productivity. Spraying the plant will take place at different stages of pest control making it hard for large-scale management. On one vine you can have a flower, a young and mature fruit at the same time. The disease and pest control for each is different and the one should not affect the other, especially the ready to harvest fruit which shouldn’t have traces of chemicals. Managing this balance is not easy, he said.

A sought-after fruit in the European market

According to Eric Ogumo, UK retail giant Tesco's manager for Africa, passion fruit is the most sought after on their shelves in Europe, retailing at Ksh 2,000 a kilo. “Buyers always ask for Kenyan fruits but there are none. “We are here to buy your fruits,” he told an attentive gathering.

Ogumo said they are buying from southern Africa countries of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia. “There is a ready market if we can get your fruits,” he said, adding that Kenya is not benefiting from newest varieties because the country is not exporting. “There are newer, better yielding, pest and diseases resistant varieties for export but they are not being grown here,” Ogumo said.

The biggest challenge in meeting pesticides residue limits is caused by there being only one registered product. The Agriculture Committee of the Council of Governors has committed to bringing agrochemical firms together with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Pest Control Products Board to discuss the extension of labels to include passion fruit in pest control

products available in the country to give farmers options. Biological control products firms have also not conducted research on the passion due to its minor crop status.

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