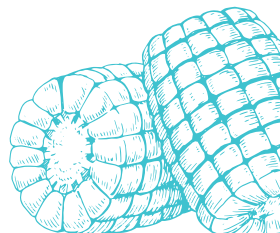




Access to quality seeds reaps results for highland farmers

Fiji's agriculture industry contributes FJD820million (8.6 per cent of GDP) to the country's economy and provides work for over 83 per cent of the country's rural population. However, the long-term resilience and competitiveness of the agricultural sector are hindered by limited access to quality agricultural inputs, including seeds. To address this constraint, MDF partnered with the local company KK's Hardware to support improved access to quality and resilient seed varieties that yield better harvests and higher incomes for farmers.

Following successful seed trials conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture's Sigatoka Research Station, KK's Hardware started importing products from the company East-West Seed in late-2020 with MDF support. MDF soon observed that the seed benefitted farmers even in the remote highlands of Nadarivatu. MDF spoke with Apenisa Vunitali, a farmer from Nadali village in Nadarivatu, to find out how using the East-West Seed product impacted his family and income.



Apenisa Vunitali, a 46-year-old farmer and father of three, has traditionally grown vegetables such as carrots, long beans and tomatoes on his three-acre farm. Vegetable farming is a common means of earning income in the mountainous region he calls home. Located on Fiji's main island Viti Levu, the area is often fondly referred to as the 'rooftop of Viti Levu'.

In May 2022, Apenisa decided to switch to sweet corn farming. His interest in sweet corn began to grow around four years ago when he received training from an INGO on growing the crop. As part of the training, he received seeds that he planted to supplement his income from vegetables.



I switched from vegetables to sweet corn because vegetable farming is a lot of work compared to focusing on just one crop. It's easier to manage, resulting in less work and more time with the family. A lot of farmers in this village are now doing sweet corn farming.

Apenisa Vunitali, Sweetcorn Farmer, Nadarivatu, Fiji.

While the returns from sweet corn were promising in terms of income and time savings, seed supply was not consistent and soon dried up. When MDF partner KK's Hardware introduced East-West Seed's Sugar King sweet corn variety to the market, Apenisa pounced on the opportunity to trial it.



Sugar King sweet corn

One 500g packet of Sugar King Sweet Corn from KK's Hardware currently costs FJD65 (AUD 42)—a good investment, according to Apenisa.

He says, "In terms of money, there is a big difference between vegetable and sweet corn farming. From not even a quarter acre, only six lines, I managed to harvest 300kg of sweet corn and sold it for FJD3 (AUD2) a kilo."

Following his first harvest of the year in August, Apenisa began supplying sweet corn to a prominent supermarket chain. In addition, there is strong demand for the produce in municipal markets. He pays FJD150 (AUD98) and makes a two-hour drive to transport his harvest to the nearest city, Lautoka, but Apenisa says the returns outweigh the costs.

Apenisa's locally grown sweet corn competes in the market with imported sweet corn, which retails in supermarkets for over FJD6 (AUD4) per ear. In comparison, local sweet corn retails for under FJD6 per kilogram, or typically three to four ears of the Sugar King variety. As demand picks up, the quality seed variety enables Apenisa to produce the volumes required to turn a profit.

Apenisa adds, "The crop is also not seasonal; it's all year round. I planted in May, and I plant a quarter acre every month. I started harvesting from August until December. Can you imagine? We are talking about tonnes!"

When comparing the two sweet corn varieties he has farmed, Apenisa shared that while both seeds had an over-90 per cent germination rate, he found he used less fertiliser with the East West Seed Sugar King variety—a major cost saving.

"The difference is also the growth rate," he said. "Sugar King seeds grow much quicker. Also, one kilo has about three ears, whereas the other variety I grew before takes four or even five ears to reach one kilo. I've been experiencing that KK's Sugar King seeds are good in the Nadarivatu area. The price might be high, but you get good returns.



I'm happy and enjoying farming. It makes my everyday life easier.

Apenisa Vunitali,
Sweetcorn Farmer, Nadarivatu, Fiji

In 2022, 991 men and women have benefitted from the use of East-West seeds. When comparing sweet corn with maize, farmers using East-West Seed Sugar King sweet corn seeds on average harvested 12 per cent more per acre and earned an additional FJD170,000 (from selling sweet corn).



Click/scan to watch the video of Apenisa Vunitali.