

Conservation farming saved them from drought

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As Shamillah Chebet walks through her garden, she talks about the huge losses she made the previous season. The sun stayed longer than usual and was harsh to her maize crop, the rains did not water her garden. She estimates she could have lost more than Shs200,000. But she did not lose everything though. Her matooke plantation has started bringing in some returns. Chebet attributes this to conservation agriculture practices such as mulching, which saved the plantation.

"With mulching, the water moisture was retained so even as there was a lot of sunshine, there was good cover for the soils, with some water. I varied the cover with banana leaves and grass, which on decomposing added nutrient value to the soil. The bunches were bigger than usual. I am glad to have had the training in conservation agriculture practices," she explains.

Retain moisture

Chebet plans to replicate the same practices to her other gardens, which are located in the lower areas of hills in Kapchorwa.

Betty Chesang and her husband, Bosco Zakayo, farm on the hills of Kapchorwa; they explain that mulching saved them albeit in a different way.

"When it rained, the mulch protected us against soil erosion. The



Above, the ways in which maize stalks are used to mulch. Below, proper spacing between the plants. PHOTOS BY EDGAR R. BATTE

soils were covered and prevented the water from running off and washing the soils into the valleys," Bosco Zakayo explains. When he realised that it would be sunny for long, he requested the neighbours, who had harvested maize, for the maize cobs and stalks, and grass that they would be burning off to get rid of the waste.

He used that to cover his two-and-a-half acre garden. He was conserving the soils so that even if it did not rain soon, the soils would retain moisture and the crops would not become completely dry.

"When the neighbours learnt of how I use the harvest left-overs, they stopped giving me the maize cobs

and stalks, and grass. They began to mulch their gardens as well. I was happy they were learning from me," he says as he inspects his matooke green garden.

Zakayo says that a bunch of matooke that was at Shs10,000 a year ago now fetches him Shs25,000 thanks to bigger bunch size due to improved farming practices learnt from AT Uganda. It is a non-governmental organisation that, among others, offers agricultural conservation services.

He points out that the bunch weighs 30-40 kilogrammes compared to the ones he harvested before that weighed 10-15 kilogrammes. He plants an acre of maize and, on the

other one and a half acres, intercrops maize with climbing beans. The beans are planted to provide soil cover before the next planting season. The maize cobs the couple has harvested are quite sizable.

He says that for land preparation, they slash the maize stalks or bush and planted without ploughing and use the stalks as mulch.

This controls the weeds. So, any that grow through the mulch are controlled by hand pulling or shallow weeding or scrapping to a depth of no more than two centimetres.

Savings made

His wife, Betty Chesang says mulching is affordable and she is going to extend the methods to her field where she intercropped finger millet and vegetables.

"When you are determined all things are possible. Poverty will be eradicated because of increased production and more income. Eventually, farmers will be able to produce crops even during the dry seasons," she adds.

The couple says conservation agriculture has boosted their productivity, incomes and improved their land

use. They have also appreciated the knowledge on preparation of organic pesticides, which they use on vegetables. This has saved them money.

They make compost manure for the vegetables and bananas. Hence, they do not have to buy fertilisers. Chesang has planted a kitchen garden of African Kale and nightshade, which she finds very handy and easy to manage.

In addition, they have since joined a Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA); Kululu United's VSLA which meets once every week to conduct their activities.

The group uses a "merry go around" method. The 22 members each saves Shs3,000 per week; Shs500 of which goes towards the group's social fund. From this, members can take interest-free loans to cater for emergencies such as medical attention, sick animals or to purchase fertilisers.

The family used their first dividends to buy goats and land and to hire more land for farming.

They plan to use their next savings to buy 200 metres of water pipe and two sprinklers. This will be used for watering the vegetables when need arises.



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