

Yum, Yum More Yam!!!

Over 95% of world production is in sub-Saharan Africa (38.8 million tonnes), largely by small-scale subsistence growers. Recently yam productivity has been affected by reductions in soil fertility (as a result of population pressure) and the increased incidence of diseases. Yam is a starchy tuber which is propagated by planting small tubers (seed yams) or tuber pieces (setts). However, research has shown that many of the diseases affecting yam are tuber-borne and planting diseased yam leads to the perpetuation and accumulation of tuber-borne pests and diseases causing reductions in the quantity and quality of yams harvested.

“Yam, the king of crops, was a very extracting king. For three or four moons it demanded hard work and constant attention from cock-crow till the chickens went back to roost.”

Chinaiu Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

The traditional, cultural and dietary importance of yam (tubers of various *Dioscorea* species) is recognised by this Nigerian author.

based on a viable business plan, for a loan to purchase planting material, pre-planting pesticides and some labour costs. Guidance in the safe application of these pesticides will be given by project staff to key informant growers. At the end of the season the growers will be able to sell their surplus seed yams. They will also pay back the loans so that a revolving fund is formed to benefit further growers. Other donors are interested in this system as it is anticipated that it should result in yam production once more becoming a sustainable and profitable activity for the growers in the region.

If farmers can plant uninfected or clean seed yams they would boost their yam productivity. However, poor farmers are often unable to save sufficient yams until planting time and the high cost, and often poor quality of marketed planting material, is a major deterrent to increasing production. A livelihoods study in Kogi State, Nigeria, found that approximately 70% of yam production costs were for planting material. Despite the short supply and high price of seed-yam, many growers perceive its production as risky. To grow seed yams, sett pieces of 50–100 g are ideal. Project R8278 has found that sett pieces of this size are vulnerable and require considerable care and attention, including application of pesticides, especially during the early stages of growth. This, unfortunately, coincides with peak farm activity when labour is expensive and growers have often exhausted their financial reserves.

During 2005–06 the project will join forces with a micro-credit scheme in Kogi State implemented by the NGO, Diocesan Development Service with a start-up grant from Gorta (an Irish charity). Yam growers in the scheme will be assisted to make an application,



Assessing an on-farm seed yam production trial in Ado-Ekiti



Inspecting a sprouting yam to check if it is good for cutting up into 'setts' to grow seed yams



Impromptu lesson, in a village near Idah, in selecting yams suitable for planting

R8278 and R8416: Up-scaling sustainable clean seed yam production systems for small-scale growers in Nigeria
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