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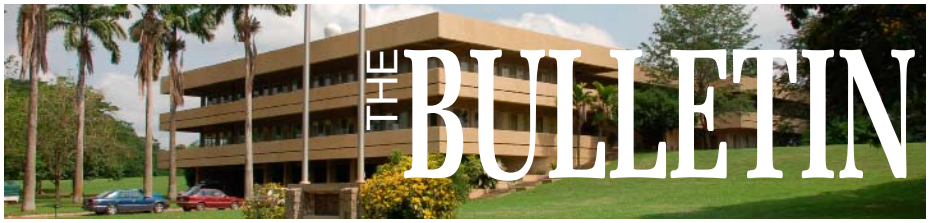

Improved cowpea make farmers smile

Farmer Mustapha, Katsina State

Improved cowpea varieties are making farmers smile. These varieties from IITA may be a solution to hunger and poverty in the savanna—a region where drought and the vagaries of climate change hold sway.

For farmer Mohamed Mustapha, coming in contact with the improved seeds helped boost his livelihood. The challenge now is how more of his colleagues in the community will have access to the same 'golden seeds.'

For the first time in his 15 years of farming, Mustapha more than doubled his cowpea yield last year on the same plot of land using improved seeds introduced by IITA and partners working on the Sudan Savanna Task Force of the Kano-Katsina-Maradi (SS TF KKM) Pilot Learning Site (PLS) of the Sub-Saharan Challenge Program.

Unable to hide his joy, Mustapha said, "I have been farming for more than 15 years in that area and never harvested more than two bags of cowpea, but last year, I got more than five bags."

According to him, "this was possible as a result of improved cowpea seeds from IITA and the adoption of improved agronomic practices."

Other interventions which Mustapha and other farmers in the community enjoyed include the provision of farm inputs and training.

By equipping farmers with improved management practices, cowpea yield losses due to pest and insects attacks have drastically decreased in the community.

"Last year, we estimated only about 20 percent loss due to pest damage," says Farmer Mustapha who lives in Safana local government, Katsina State, Nigeria.

With the successes recorded by Mustapha and his fellow farmers in the community, more farmers, today, are demanding improved cowpea seeds.

"The problem now is that we need more cowpea. Researchers should give us more cowpea varieties because many farmers are looking for good varieties to plant," says Mustapha.

With more money in his pocket, Mustapha uses his additional income to send his children to school and meet other needs at home.

Alpha Kamara, IITA-Savanna System Agronomist who is the Sudan Savanna Taskforce Leader, says the dissemination of the solutions is helping in boosting crop productivity and generating wealth in the drought-prone regions of the savannas.

According to him, the team is tackling the limitations via innovation platforms in a holistic manner. The SS TF KKM project, funded by the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa, (FARA), aims to tackle these constraints and also enhance marketing opportunities for farmers in the region.

Kamara will be reporting on the results of the project's work during the 5th World Cowpea Research Conference that will be held in Saly, Senegal, next week. IITA is organizing this conference in collaboration with the Institut Senegalais de Recherches Agricoles (ISRA), Dry Bean Pulses Collaborative Research Support Program (Michigan State University), and Purdue Improved Cowpea Storage (Purdue University).

Partners in the project include the Katsina and Katsina State Agricultural Development Programme (ADP), Institute of Agricultural Research, Zaria; National Agricultural Extension Research and Liaison Services, National Animal Production Research Institute, Bayero University Kano, Local Government Councils, and input and output dealers.

While researchers are seeking ways to make more cowpea varieties available to farmers, Mustapha says, "I have never come in contact with an organization such as IITA. They gave us improved cowpea seeds, but more importantly, they gave us knowledge."

Station administrators meet in Ibadan

Station Administrators are in headquarters this week for a training and a series of meetings with R4D Support units. Photo shows Training Coordinator Lola Idowu (leftmost), Personnel Manager Olu Babasanya (middle), and consultants Mary Njogu and Charles Karwega of Artemis Consultancy with the station administrators.

Energy conservation tips:

Power down computers, monitors, and peripherals when not in use; and make use of natural light whenever and wherever possible.

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New yam festival in Nigeria reechoes pests and labor challenges

For Nigerians currently feasting on and celebrating the yam harvest with carnival-like festivities, the starchy tuber is more than a food staple.

But the celebration of the 'King of Crops' has equally brought to the front burner the challenges of pests, diseases, and high labor costs associated with the cultivation of the crop.

Traditional fertility and marriage ceremonies are not carried out in the southeast of Nigeria unless a big unwieldy yam--which can weigh up to 70 kg (150 lb) --is presented.

This is why the Igbo people refer to yam as "the king of crops" and August and September are a time for traditional dances, drumming, masquerades and dressing up in village squares.

"From my great grandfathers, yam has always been celebrated because it is very important to us," said Mary Eze at a new yam festival in the village of Ukpo Dunukofia in Anambra State.

"We can pound yam, we can boil the yam and when we eat we have a lot of energy," she added, boasting of its versatility.

Though driving through the country's southern and middle belt regions, one would never know there was a problem.

Fields look green and fertile and seem to promise a good yam harvest.

Yet experts say yam production is decreasing in some traditional producing areas because of declining soil fertility and increasing pest pressure.

Trader showing off his new yam, Dunukofia, Anambra State

"Yam has come under serious threat from pests and is in competition with other less nutritious crops like cassava," says Robert Asiedu, R4D director at IITA, Ibadan.

Another challenge facing yam production is the high cost of labor and there appears not to be enough capital available to farmers for increasing their production.

Small-scale farmers like Thomas Anioji find it hard to get loans.

Most small-scale farmers in Nigeria are not able to access loans because of a lack of security or track record.

This is the fate of farmers at Isu-Awa community in Awgu, Enugu State, who are no longer able meet their family's needs because of declining production.

"It's so difficult to get support to plant yams," says farmer Thomas Anioji.

--Excerpted from *Celebrating Nigeria's yummy yams* by Fidelis Mbah, BBC News, southern Nigeria (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11385436?print=true).

Scientists head for Senegal to give African hunger a black eye

5th World Cowpea Research Conference

A long neglected crop with the potential to halt hunger for millions in Africa, sustain the livestock revolution under way in developing countries, rejuvenate nutrient-sapped soils, and even feed astronauts on extended space missions, is attracting scientists from around the world to Senegal next week for the Fifth World Cowpea Research Conference.

"It's hard to imagine a more perfect crop, particularly for Africa, where food production lags behind population growth, demand for livestock products is soaring, and climate change is bringing new stresses to already challenging growing conditions," said cowpea breeder Christian Fatokun of IITA, which is co-organizing the conference in collaboration with Institut Senegalais de Recherches Agricoles (ISRA), Dry Grain Pulses Collaborative Research Support Program, and Purdue University.

"But fulfilling the promise of this marvelous legume requires intensive efforts to deal with threats that inhibit production and long-term storage," he added. "The good news in Senegal is that researchers will be revealing new and innovative approaches to deal with the pests and weeds that attack cowpeas at every stage of their lifecycle and with the voracious weevils that devour dried cowpeas."

The cowpea, which is also known as the black-eyed pea, is one of the world's oldest crops. It is currently cultivated on 10 million hectares, mainly in Central and West Africa, but also in India, Australia, North America, and parts of Europe. It was brought to the Americas on slave ships and became a favorite of President George Washington, who was looking for a variety of peas—he called them "pease"—that could withstand the warm climates of the southern United States.

For more information about the conference go to: http://cowpea2010.iita.org/