

Farming Is Zeena's Retirement Plan

“I retired from government service rather prematurely in 2000 and settled here to try farming,” Zeena told Seeds of Gold. She worked as a receptionist in Uganda Prisons where she had been attracted to poultry keeping because there was a demonstration poultry project inside Masaka Government Prisons where she was stationed.

Widowed about 20 years ago when she was financially helpless and burdened with school fees issues for her children, she now points to various graduation photographs of her daughters and sons lining up the picture rail in the living room of her modest house.

She has also supported the children of her departed sister to acquire school education and they are now employed and living on their own. Besides her children's education, she lives in a modern house whose construction has been possible through farming.

“When I settled here I had altogether about five acres of land,” she says. “I began with setting up a poultry project of about 100 birds but I kept increasing the number and at one time I had about 500 layers. At that time a Christian charity organisation, World Vision, was doing a lot of development work in the rural communities.

I volunteered to mobilise fellow women in the area to attend World Vision training sessions in food security, school fees payment, sanitation, and poverty alleviation through farming. The poverty alleviation training was mainly in modern livestock and crop production practices. I did not just mobilize fellow women to attend the trainings; I also participated always as one of the learners. That is how I got introduced to coffee growing, and Friesian cattle zero-grazing.”

She adds that whenever World Vision trained them in any economic activity, like banana production or coffee production, it donated some initial planting material.

“In our case we each received cloned Robusta coffee seedlings which I would personally plant every rainy season. Later I received a Friesian in-calf which produced a kid within about a month.

We were expected to give back to World Vision the first calf produced by the cow, which I did and went on keeping the cow and getting more calves almost every other year and selling milk for the past eighteen years. I use the cow dung as manure for my banana garden of about an acre.” Her banana garden looked quite impressive with many heavy bunches of banana visible here and there.

Today Akiiki owns about three and half acres of cloned Robusta coffee and Phillip Muluya, Chairman of Kabonera Coffee Cooperative Society describes her as its most important female coffee farmer.

“Hajjati Akiiki sells more coffee than lots and lots of farmers and she is a farmer we wish all other farmers should copy. Her coffee is always dry and clean. ”

She has an important reason why she chose to become a coffee farmer.

“I chose to major in coffee production after realizing that it is a crop to be harvested every year and from which the farmer can get a large sum of money in a lump sum,” she explained. Yet as a poultry and cattle keeper she would earn money selling milk and eggs every day.

“As members of Kabonera Coffee Farmers Co-operative Society we are required to pick only red ripe coffee and dry it thoroughly on tarpaulin before taking it to our buying center. Our coffee is exported privately to Europe by a coffee farmer organization called Nucafe. So we really insist on clean postharvest handling of the crop.”

A walk around her mixed farm revealed well-nourished Robusta coffee trees heavily laden with green coffee berries, a sweet potato garden, a vigorous banana garden, and a maize garden. “One farming activity supports another,” she told Seeds of Gold. “Chicken droppings provide us with organic manure to grow maize and we also apply it on coffee.

However sometimes we supplement it with synthetic fertilizer. The maize bran is used as chicken feed.” She has a lot of encouragement for fellow women who have some land to grow coffee. “It should never be regarded as a crop for only men,” she said.

“As women we can grow it and actually own it.” She also encourages women with little land to keep poultry. “Water and fluctuating egg prices are some of the main impediments but one can

get around these by building a rain water tank and using chicken droppings as manure to boost production of other crops such as beans, banana, or groundnuts that can be sold.”

Weeds in her gardens are partly controlled by mulching with eucalyptus tree twigs, cultivation with a hand hoe, and herbicide spraying. She has dug trenches across the garden to trap running water and to fight soil erosion.