

By Owen Wagabaza

When Samson Kabanda of Kasanda, Luwero heard

about what the coffee farmers were earning, he was inspired to plant some coffee. With savings of about sh2m, he set out to plant coffee on three acres of their family land.

Unfortunately, when it reached the harvesting season, yields were not pleasing. Kabanda would later realise that he had not followed all the steps it takes to plant coffee.

Interestingly, many farmers find themselves in the same situation. According to experts, planting coffee on a commercial basis requires adequate preparations for good returns.

Planting

The coffee seedlings should be planted at the onset of the rainy season in holes measuring two feet by two feet wide and at least 45-60cm deep. It is important that the holes are dug three months before planting.

Patrick Kasambeko, a coffee management specialist at the National Agricultural Advisory Services, says the holes should be filled with top soil mixed with one bucket/basin of well-prepared manure or compost before planting. He calls for ring mulching to keep the soil around the trees moist.

Kasambeko says a small shade around each young plant

How to grow coffee

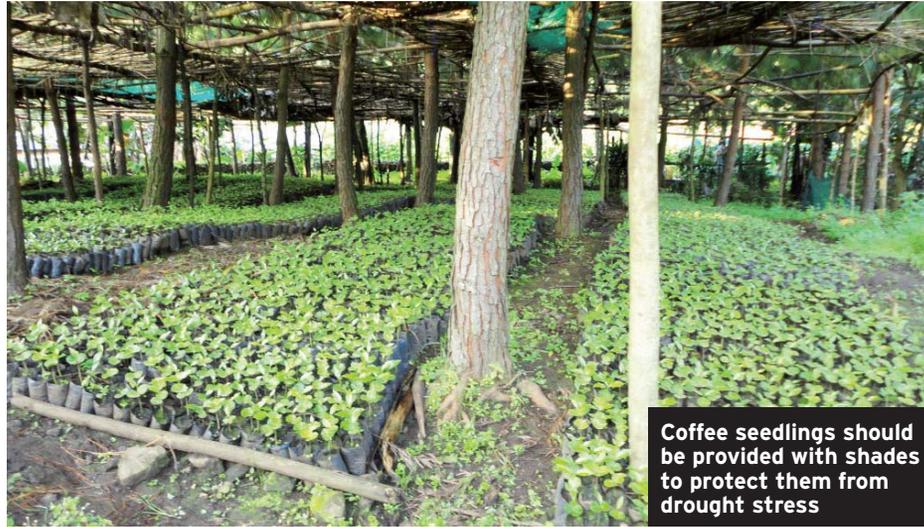
TESTING THE SOILS BEFORE PLANTING IS IMPORTANT IN COFFEE GROWING

should be provided to protect it from drought stress. He, however, explains that spacing differs according to the variety. For example, Arabica coffee spacing can be 2.5 metres by 2.5 metres apart while for Robusta, 3 metres by 3 metres is ideal.

The most common types of coffee in Uganda are Robusta and Arabica. An acre of Robusta can accommodate up to 1,000 coffee trees and a seedling costs between sh300 and sh500. Farmers are, however, cautioned to buy seedlings from certified nursery operators.

“As coffee grows, the maintenance costs tend to come down, but what is crucial in the initial stages is to keep the plantation weed free through mulching and weeding. Expect a full yield after three years,” Kasambeko says.

Intercropping, especially



Coffee seedlings should be provided with shades to protect them from drought stress

with bananas is recommended to moderate the effects of drought. Proper spacing should, however, be put into consideration. Aside from bananas, one can plant shade trees to enhance soil fertility as well as reduce soil erosion.

Maintenance

According to Deus Nuwagaba, the production officer at National Union of Coffee Agribusinesses and Farm Enterprises (NUCAFE), testing the soils before planting is important in coffee growing. This will help a farmer to know whether the soils are suitable for the crop.

But also, it is not economical to apply fertilisers without having a soil analysis, which unfortunately, many farmers do not carry out.

For soil testing, there are simple technologies to keep costs down. “There is a soil testing kit at Makerere University College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, which is user friendly, though not yet commercialised. Such simple technologies can keep the cost down. The kit is affordable and user-friendly and goes for about sh250,000,” Nuwagaba says.

A farmer can also detect the missing nutrients in the soil

by looking at the health of the plant. That aside, feeding the soil appropriately is also important.

“As coffee grows, nutrients are drained from the soil. A good farmer should put his coffee husks back into the farm. If you take your coffee for processing and leave the husks there, you are doing what we call soil mining. You are not giving back to the soil,” Nuwagaba says.

“If you use virgin land, it will take about four years without using fertilisers. You start mining the soil when you start harvesting,” he adds.

Pest management

According to Edward Lutakome

Ssentamu, a coffee farmer and trainer, a good farmer ought to have a plan on pest management. With coffee, pests’ attacks often begin to build-up as soon as the rains begin, following a period of relative dormancy during the dry season.

The black coffee twig borer and coffee berry borer are some of such pests that farmers should be on the look-out for at the onset of the rains.

“These are pests that are threatening to destroy the coffee industry. Farmers must look out and handle them before they spread,” says Lutakome. These can be managed by spraying with pesticides.

Returns

From an acre of Robusta coffee, a farmer can harvest up to 8,000kg of coffee beans per annum, considering that each tree yields an average of four kilograms. With a market price of sh2,500 for *kiboko* (unshelled coffee), a farmer can earn up to sh20m per season from just one acre.

Moses Sseninde, a coffee farmer in Nakifuma in Mukono district, however, says farmers can reap more if they first process the coffee.

The shelled clean coffee commonly referred to as *kase* fetches up to sh7,000 per kilogramme.

According to Sseninde, one can harvest about 3kg of *kase* from a tree that has received average supervision and 5kg from one that has been well-tended.