# Pack 102, Item 5

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**Reviving banana production to boost production and income in Ugunja District, western Kenya**

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**Notes to broadcaster**

Bananas are one of the most important crops in East and Central Africa, both as a staple food and as a source of income for small-scale farmers. Most banana farmers in Kenya grow less than half an acre of bananas and plant many different varieties. The major banana-growing areas in Kenya include the Rift Valley, Nyanza, Central, Northeastern and Coast regions. Kenya produces one million tonnes of bananas per year. But banana yields have dropped everywhere because of declining soil fertility, pests, and diseases.

In western Kenya, many pests and diseases pose a serious threat to bananas. A disease called Banana Xanthomonas Wilt has been spreading rapidly and presents the greatest threat. The disease is transmitted mainly through contaminated tools, infected planting materials, and insects. There are no escaping varieties. Infected banana plants show a number of symptoms, including rapid yellowing and wilting of tender leaves, shriveling, blackening and eventual drying of male buds, and premature ripening and rotting of fingers, which makes fruit inedible.

The outbreak of Xanthomonas wilt in western Kenya has been addressed in many ways. Governments and other bodies created massive awareness campaigns to educate farmers on how to diagnose and prevent the disease from spreading. The campaign teams used the ABCD strategy, which includes:

A) complete removal of diseased plants, including mats

B) burying uprooted and chopped plant materials

C) disinfecting farm tools with sodium hypochlorite or fire

D) timely removal of male buds with a forked stick to prevent insects from spreading the disease

Ugunja District in western Kenya has about 200 hectares of dessert and cooking bananas. Preferred varieties in Ugunja are Ng’ombe for cooking and PHIA types for ripening. A few farmers make processed products like flour, pastes, and juice.

This script is based on interviews with banana farmers in Ugunja District. The banana farmers belong to four field schools in the district.

At the Farmer Field Schools, the farmers learned how to manage fields infected with Xanthomonas Wilt and stop the further spread of the disease. These farmers helped to revive banana production. Now Ugunja District is able to produce bananas for household consumption and for markets.

Estimated running time: 20 minutes, with intro and outro music.

**Characters**

Host

Reporter

Farmers:

Pamela Oluoch

George Obok

Charles Siang’a

Beatrice Auma

Development agent: Michael Nyamai

MUSIC TO INTRODUCE THE PROGRAM

**HOST:** Welcome, listeners. When farmers in western Kenya hear the word “banana,” the smiles fade from our lips and our faces turn sorrowful. Why? Because we have been faced with a serious banana disease and we are slowly losing hope for bananas.

But today, we are here to bring joy to your hearts. In today’s program, we will talk about planting clean, disease-free bananas for increased production and income.

FADE IN MUSIC FOR 20 SECONDS, THEN UNDER

**HOST:** Stay with us today as our reporter talks to farmers about disease-free bananas.

**REPORTER:** We visited four villages where farmers were trained in Farmer Field Schools, and I talked to two women and two men.

First, I went to Muhola village to meet Pamela Oluoch. I asked her why she chose banana farming.

**PAMELA OLUOCH:** I belong to a group that supports orphans and vulnerable children. In 2006, the group gave each member five suckers of bananas grown from clean, disease-free planting materials produced in an agricultural laboratory. I am the only one who took good care of the banana seed I was given, and all five survived.

Since then, I’ve managed my banana orchard well. I have 1000 plants that came from those five suckers I was given initially.

**REPORTER:** How do you manage your banana orchard?

**PAMELA OLUOCH:** When I planted my first bananas, I was trained on manuring and watering. I apply manure to maintain healthy crops. I apply it at planting time, and at four and eight months after planting. I also use maize stalks or grass or even leaves as mulch to retain moisture during dry spells.

**REPORTER:** Have you come across any banana diseases in your orchard?

**PAMELA OLUOCH:** Yes, Xanthomonas wilt disease. That is a very dangerous disease.

**REPORTER:** How did you recognize the disease?

**PAMELA OLUOCH:** The Sidindi Farmer Field School trained us on seed, diseases, and management of banana. It was easy to understand what the problem was.

**REPORTER:** How did you deal with the disease?

**PAMELA OLUOCH:** We can prevent the disease by cutting off the male buds to avoid infection through insects. This should be done when all the banana fingers have developed. We also avoid using contaminated tools, and we totally destroy affected plants by uprooting them, and then drying and burning or burying them under soil.

**REPORTER:** There is a lot of talk these days about climate-smart farming practices. Are these practices considered climate-smart?

**PAMELA OLUOCH:** Yes they are, because we use naturally available resources like compost manure, leaves, grass, and maize stalks, instead of purchased fertilizers. Even when dealing with banana diseases, we do not spray with chemical remedies but use natural ways of managing the disease. Using these natural substances results in fewer emissions of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere.

**REPORTER:** Do you sell your bananas, and how easy is it to find buyers?

**PAMELA OLUOCH:** The community knows that I grow bananas. Traders come to my home to buy them. I started selling planting materials along time ago when I was the only banana farmer around. Planting materials sold like hot cakes then. Today, seed sales have dropped because many people are growing bananas. I’ve also encouraged my neighbours to plant bananas. We sell as a group sometimes when all of us or a few of us have bananas ready for sale.

**REPORTER:** What benefits have you enjoyed from growing bananas?

**PAMELA OLUOCH:** I use bananas for food. I am a widow and I’ve been able to pay secondary school fees for my child. I am always sure of getting money from selling bananas.

Fade in music then under

**REPORTER:** Here we are on George Obok’s farm. Good morning, George.

**GEORGE OBOK:** Good morning to you. Welcome to our home.

**REPORTER:** Thank you. When did you start growing bananas? And what inspired you to start?

**GEORGE OBOK:** I started in 2010 after I got inspired by young orphans who had been given planting materials by a “Family helper project.” Their bananas did amazingly well, which was not the usual case in this community.

**REPORTER:** What was usual in the community?

**GEORGE OBOK:** Banana production had almost gone underground because so many farms were attacked by pests and diseases. Most community members stopped tending to their bananas.

**REPORTER:** How did you find planting materials?

**GEORGE OBOK:** In 2010, there was a field school for people who were interested in planting bananas as well as for those who already had bananas but whose bananas were diseased. The field school had a demonstration plot where we learned banana management practices, including how to prevent and control the spread of pests and diseases.

**REPORTER:** Did you learn about Xanthomonas wilt disease?

**GEORGE OBOK:** Yes, we learnt how to prevent the disease from spreading by cutting off the male buds with a forked stick. This prevents insects like bees from transferring infection from the buds of diseased plants to the buds of a healthy plant. We also learnt how to clean tools with disinfectants and disinfect them in a burning flame.

**REPORTER:** Did you learn any methods for conserving water and soil?

**GEORGE OBOK:** In terms of retaining water, I mulch with maize stalks, grass, or leaves to prevent loss of moisture during dry spells. I use compost manure to retain water in the soil. Compost manure keeps the banana plants cool and able to withstand dry spells. I also dug terraces to prevent soil erosion and water runoff. I planted Napier grass along trenches which hold rainwater and allow it to soak into the soil. This also prevents soil from being washed away when it rains.

**REPORTER:** Has your knowledge helped other community members?

**GEORGE OBOK:** I didn’t have Xanthomonas wilt on my farm. But after learning how to identify affected farms, I helped neighbours by attending community meetings, where I taught the community on the dangers of the disease and the appropriate preventive and control measures.

**REPORTER:** Is it easy to find markets to sell your bananas?

**GEORGE OBOK:** It’s not hard because some retailers are very familiar with me. I get phone calls from them and prepare the number of bunches they request. I also own a shop and sometimes my wife sells through the shop. I have a sister living in the Coastal Region almost 1000 kilometres from here, and I send her bananas as a parcel on the bus. This earns more than those I sell from home.

**REPORTER:** Has the income from banana sales helped you?

**GEORGE OBOK:** I have two children in high school and their school fees come from banana sales. I am also putting up a house, courtesy of banana sales. I am recognized in the community through my work with bananas, and people refer to me on banana issues.

Fade in music then under

**REPORTER:** Charles Siang’a has gone out with his cattle, but the sound of a motorbike tells me that he is approaching. (PAUSE) Good afternoon.

**CHARLES SIANG’A:** Good afternoon to you.

**REPORTER:** When did you start banana farming?

**CHARLES SIANG’A:** It’s ten years since I started growing bananas. In 2010, when the field school came to the community, I was invited to be part of the team. That is where I learnt good banana management practices, including pest and disease management.

**REPORTER:** You have a nursery too. How did you start it?

**CHARLES SIANG’A:** When we were being trained, I got an opportunity to go to Uganda to learn. In Uganda, I saw people who specialized in producing planting materials and I became interested. When we came back to Kenya, those who were interested in nurseries were trained to produce clean planting materials. We made an agreement with the laboratories to sell planting materials to us for hardening. We harden them by gradually increasing their exposure to sun and rain. So this nursery is for hardening before I sell to buyers.

**REPORTER:** Who are your buyers?

**CHARLES SIANG’A:** Mostly community members, and some programs that support other farmers.

**REPORTER:** How much does a seedling cost?

**CHARLES SIANG’A:** One seedling costs 150 shillings. I sometimes sell suckers at 100 shillings, or even less depending on the demand.

Fade in music, then under

**REPORTER:** We make a visit to Beatrice Auma’s farm in the evening.

**BEATRICE AUMA:** Good evening and welcome.

**REPORTER:** Good evening, Beatrice, how are you doing?

**BEATRICE AUMA:** I am good.

**REPORTER:** How are your bananas doing?

**BEATRICE AUMA:** Not very well right now, but they have been marvelous. We can walk around the farm and see.

**REPORTER:** I can see some bananas that are ready for harvest. What is your plan for these bananas?

**BEATRICE AUMA:** Because I relaxed a bit with banana work, I will use these bananas just for home consumption. The main reason I went into banana production is because I love eating bananas! Before I planted mine, I would buy bananas to eat at home. So now I have cut my cost by producing my own.

**REPORTER:** So you don’t sell your bananas?

**BEATRICE AUMA:** I do. In fact, the poultry house you see is from banana sales. Even with the bananas that are ready now, the least I would receive would be 600 shillings for the bunch on one tree—and I didn’t even weed! You can imagine how big the bananas would be if they were well-tended.

**REPORTER:** Apart from the poultry house, how else has banana growing helped you?

**BEATRICE AUMA:** My husband and I do no other work; we only farm. And it’s through bananas that we are able to comfortably pay school fees for our two children in high school, and the others in primary school.

**REPORTER:** Who are your main buyers?

**BEATRICE AUMA:** Retailers come from the market to buy from us. My neighbour has bananas too, and when both of us have bananas ready for the market, the retailers take them together. To us, marketing isn’t a problem. We both have the best performing varieties that every market wants.

**REPORTER:** Thank you very much, Beatrice, for the information.

**BEATRICE AUMA:** Thank you, too, and come again.

Sound of a motorbike taking off

Fade up music then under

**REPORTER:** Last, I speak with Michael Nyamai. Mr. Nyamai is the director of a non-government organization called Rural Energy and Food Security Organization.

**REPORTER:** When did you start working with bananas and what led you to bananas rather than other crops?

**MICHAEL NYAMAI:** We started working with bananas in 2006. We work with other crops, but what led us to bananas was that farmers kept reporting that a strange disease had affected their banana fields. When we visited their farms, we saw the effects but didn’t know what disease it was.

**REPORTER:** When did you start working in Ugunja District, and what were you doing with the banana farmers?

**MICHAEL NYAMAI:** We started in 2010. We did community trainings in every district. We formed Farmer Field Schools. We trained farmers to manage Xanthomonas wilt by following good practices like preventing pests and diseases, using clean tools, and checking the field for diseases.

We also ran community awareness campaigns to sensitize farmers on how to manage the disease in order to prevent it from spreading to other farmers. We included even those who didn’t see banana as a major crop but had mats that were infected. We encouraged farmers to destroy diseased plants by chopping them into pieces and drying them or burying them underground.

**REPORTER:** What did you do to ensure that the disease did not recur?

**MICHAEL NYAMAI:** We encouraged farmers to plant clean seed from recognized seed producers. We also discouraged farmers from planting the varieties that are most susceptible to the disease—varieties such as Ngoja, Nyaluo, Nyasorio, Nyar, Garissa, and sweet bananas. We encouraged them to plant improved and certified varieties like FHIA types, Cavendish types, and Ng’ombe.

**REPORTER:** Did you influence the farmers in choosing which varieties to grow, or did you recommend a particular variety?

**MICHAEL NYAMAI:** No, but we arranged for Kenyan banana producers to travel to Uganda where they saw different varieties under different treatments in conditions that were the same as in Kenya. Also, the farmers could choose by seeing how different varieties performed at the field school.

**REPORTER:** Have you helped market the farmers’ produce?

**MICHAEL NYAMAI:** We helped the farmers form groups where they now sell collectively.

**REPORTER:** What practices did you train the farmers to use?

**MICHAEL NYAMAI:** We encourage farmers to use compost manure as fertilizer, and to use leaves, grass, and maize stalks as mulch. Farmers also build trenches and terraces to control water runoff and reduce soil erosion. Farmers can make money with bananas mostly because there is almost no use of commercial fertilizers.

**REPORTER:** Are these all climate-smart practices?

**MICHAEL NYAMAI:** Yes, all these practices are climate-smart because they minimize the use of purchased inputs like fertilizer.

**HOST:** Listeners, this brings us to the end of today’s program on planting clean bananas for increased production and income. We have learnt how banana farmers in western Kenya are managing serious diseases and pest problems such as Xanthomonas wilt that have been plaguing their banana production. We have also learnt how these farmers market their produce. Finally, we heard about the many benefits of growing and eating bananas.

If these farmers can do it, we can also do it! Till next time, I am your presenter, \_\_\_\_. Bye.

Fade out music then out

## Acknowledgements

Contributed by: Rachel Awuor, Ugunja Community Resource Centre

Reviewed by: Mr. Michael Nyamai, Executive Director, Rural Energy and Food Security Organization (REFSO)

**Sources of information**

Interviews:

Michael Nyamai, Rural Energy and Food Security Organization (REFSO)

Pamela Oluoch, Sidindi farmer field school

Beatrice Auma, Sigomere farmer field school

Charles Siang’a, Ugunja farmer field school

George Obok, Sidindi farmer field school

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