

## Scientists on the verge of releasing new striga-resistant sorghum

Written by Eric Akasa

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***Agricultural scientists have developed and tested more than 50 improved varieties of sorghum that are resistant to both drought and Striga which could increase food production in the Horn of Africa.***

These varieties have been tested in Kenya, Eritrea and Sudan, and are set for wider trial in seven countries in the region.

Currently the scientists are discussing protocols for more widespread testing and release of the new varieties to farmers in Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda.

“The development and utilization of Striga-resistant crop varieties holds the best promise of combating and reducing the effect of this noxious weed on sorghum yields,” says ASARECA’s AGROBIO Program Manager, Dr. Charles Mugoya.

According to Dr Dan Kiambi, Executive Director of the Nairobi-based Africa Biodiversity Conservation and Innovations Centre (ABCIC), striga is second only to drought as a factor reducing the yield of staple food crops in Africa.

“It is one of the most serious constraints to cereal production in Africa, sometimes causing up to 100% yield losses on farmers’ fields,” he says.

Striga attacks the roots of young crops starving them of nutrients leading to low grain yields of 500 to 800kg/ha in Africa, compared to up to seven tonnes per hectare (7 ton/ha) achieved in other parts of the world.

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The weed is a prolific seed-producer, a single plant producing more than 50,000 dust-like seeds that are readily spread by wind, water or contact, and which survive in soil for up to 20 years.

It not only damages crops from below, but also emerges from the ground after farmers have finished weeding, making crop management a doubly arduous task for farmers.

“We are at the tail-end of developing technologies that offer hope for problems that have been very serious sorghum production constraints in East and Central Africa. In a year’s time we should have products ready for farmers,” says Dr Kiambi.

According to FAO, Striga had infested more than a half of Africa’s cereal growing by the late 1980s.

Studies undertaken in 2010 show that 32 percent of sorghum-producing areas in Eastern and Central Africa are already infested with Striga. As a result, the weed accounts for 22 percent of sorghum yield losses (2,225,000 tonnes) every year, valued at USD 623 million.

FAO estimates that Striga destroys USD7 billion worth of cereal crops every year in Africa jeopardizing the food security of more than 100 million people.

In the Horn of Africa, Striga destroys about USD2.89 billion worth of maize and sorghum every year, sorghum suffering 86 percent of this loss. Maize is the most popular cereal in Eastern and Central Africa, followed by sorghum.