

Kenya scientists develop weed-resistant sorghum

Written by BY JOHN MUCHANGI
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Local farmers will have a new sorghum variety resistant to the feared striga weed at the end of this year. Striga attacks sorghum by growing into the roots where it sucks out water and nutrients. It slowly kills the plant and three weeks later emerges from the soil having done most of the damage.

Director of the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) Ephraim Mukisira said the new striga-resistant variety could be available to farmers in December this year. "In some cases striga has caused more than 100 per cent damage. This has really discouraged farmers," he said yesterday. Striga, also known as a witch weed, is difficult to manage and can stay under the ground for more than 15 years waiting for a farmer to plant cereal crops which facilitate their growth.

Yesterday, Dr Mukisira said they are testing preferred varieties in the field before releasing the seeds to farmers. The KARI director was speaking in Nairobi at a meeting organised by the Africa Biodiversity Conservation and Innovations Centre and the Association for Strengthening Agriculture Research in Eastern and Central Africa. The meeting was also attended by scientists from Sudan and Eritrea where more than 50 weed-resistant varieties have also been tested.

Sorghum is highly profitable and has rebounded in Kenya as a key cash and food crop. Dr Mukisira said it offers better returns than maize in the face of unreliable rains because of climate change. The East African Breweries also plans to buy sorghum from farmers for its popular keg beer.

The ministry of Agriculture says although sorghum growing had declined since 1976, last year farmers produced more than 130,000 metric tonnes. "We are at the tail-end of developing technologies that offer hope for problems that have been very serious sorghum production

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constraints in East and Central Africa. In a year's time we should have products ready for farmers," says Dr Dan Kiambi, director of the Africa Biodiversity Conservation and Innovations Centre .

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that 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.