

Keitt Exporters sources avocados for exports and for value addition from smallholder farmers in different parts of Kenya.
Photo Credit: Murimi

Fresh produce firm unlocks avocado export market for smallholders

By Murimi Gitari

KENYAN smallholder avocado farmers are often subjected to exploitation by middlemen, and have to choose between seeing their produce go to waste or selling at a 'throwaway' price.

However, Keitt Exporters, a fresh produce exporting company, has come to the rescue of the farmers by offering them a market for avocados.

The company sources avocados for exports and for value addition from smallholder farmers across the country.

Dipesh Devraj, the operations and commercial director, says under their Home of Avocado Farmers programme,

the company aggregates produce from farmers so as to meet the market demand for avocados.

Currently the programme started in 2009 has over 7,000 farmers.

"The programme has mostly smallholder farmers mostly across the country. We enter into contracts with these farmers and start training them on avocado growing so as to get quality fruits for the market," Dipesh says.

"Keitt Exporters is a grower and an exporting company predominantly in the value chains of fruits and conventional vegetables. We have been in business for over two

decades. Avocados are our signature crops followed by mangos. In the sub-Saharan Africa we are the largest exporter of avocados."

Once the company enters into contracts with farmers, it assigns its agronomists to them for advisory services.

Dipesh likens avocado farming to raising a child that needs care, attention and feeding so as to have better results at the end.

Dipesh and other directors of the company also participate in field days organised by the company for farmers and take time to listen to the challenges they face and their needs for avocado farming.

This way, they are able to receive the right feedback needed to design appropriate training for the farmers on nurturing their avocado trees so as to improve production.

The company discourages the farmers from buying seedlings on the roadsides and instead procure from certified nurseries or its own nurseries where it sells the seedlings at subsidised rates.

A common challenge the smallholder farmers face is lack of knowledge in crop management and nutrition.

Some of the fruits supplied to them come deformed due to lack of calcium, zinc, boron and other nutrients for avocados.

However, Dipesh says that when they get such fruits from the farmers or any other fruit that does not meet the export market requirement, they still buy them and do value addition at the company's oil processing plant located in Kenol, Murang'a County where they also have a state of the art packhouse.

The company has three commercial farms with an average of 750 hectares and handles more than 600 containers of avocados in a season by sea and a similar number by air for the export market.

The three farms are located in Embu, Meru and Subukia in Nakuru. Small-scale producers are advised to form groups with a minimum membership of 30 growers who cumulatively can put 50 acres under the fruit.

"We have expanded to Tanzania where we are putting up a belt of avocado farms, almost 2,000 acres. Basically, what has led us to the expansion is the need to strategise for the future so as to meet the demand," Dipesh says.

"Once these farmers supply avocado to us, they get their payment within 48 hours through mobile money transfer."

The smallholder farmers who purchase seedlings from the company's nurseries are also encouraged to join the firm's outgrowers club to benefit from a guaranteed market and technical support. The agronomists from Keitt work with the farmers through the journey till harvest, providing regular guidance and support every step of the way to maximise production.

The fruits that they get from the farmers do not mature at the same time being an advantage for them as they are able to get avocados at different seasons for the market.

When a Chinese delegation toured Kenya to access the country's capacity to supply avocados, Keitt Exporters was among the nurseries, farms and packhouses identified by the Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service (KEPHIS) to host the delegation, attesting the firm's leading position in the sector. After the assessment, the company was certified by KEPHIS to export avocados to the Asian market.

Currently the firm has an exclusive market with various partners and customers in Europe where they are selling the Kenya avocados. Other markets are Middle East, Russia, Turkey and Asia.

Keitt's confidence in the future of the avocado is informed by reports the market is growing globally for the fresh market and processing into oil. Statistics in Europe show consumers have moved from eating 400g per person to 7kg.



Farmers sorting avocados after harvesting. Photo Credit: Murimi