

Gutsy grower of the miracle tree

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INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS

Mavis Mathabatha, shown here harvesting leaves of the *Moringa oleifera*, was last year named Woman Entrepreneur of the Year. Picture: Antoine de Ras

Mavis Mogasie Mathabatha, a farmer in Limpopo who has planted a small forest of *Moringa oleifera* trees in her home village of Tooseng, is harvesting the leaves and producing a nutritious supplement that promises to go a long way towards eradicating malnutrition in impoverished communities.



They are the so-called “miracle trees”, the leaves of which are so beneficial that they can improve the health of children if eaten either fresh or in powdered form.

When Mathabatha learned this, she enlisted the help of local women and planted the first saplings on a 10ha farm. They grew rapidly. Then she harvested the leaves, ground them into a powder and encouraged mothers to add it to their children’s staple meal.

The results were there for all to see. The boys and girls blossomed.

In September last year the Department of Agriculture recognised Mathabatha’s initiative and named her Woman Entrepreneur of the Year.

Yet it was almost by chance that Mathabatha learned about the amazing benefits of this versatile plant and went to work.

She says she was discussing the problems of malnutrition and poverty in Limpopo with the Reverend Corine McClintock of Sparrow Ministries, Maraisburg, some years ago when McClintock told her about Moringa trees being used so effectively in Malawi. She thought they might be the solution in Limpopo.

Mathabatha, a mother and grandmother, did her research and found that was indeed the case. The leaves of the Moringa are loaded with nutrients and contain more vitamin C than oranges, more vitamin A than carrots, more iron than roast beef, more potassium than bananas and more protein than milk and eggs.

The tree is nature’s gift to humankind – but though its benefits have been exploited in other parts of Africa, South America, India and the Far East, it was largely unknown in South Africa. This was certainly worth trying.

With the help of the women in her village, bush was cleared and the first 1 500 trees were planted.

“Fortunately the trees grow very fast and we were able to start picking the nutritious leaves within a month,” Mathabatha said.

“Most village families seldom have access to meat and vegetables so the children don’t get the vitamins and minerals they need for healthy physical and mental development. However, once the mothers started adding the powdered leaf to their food, the difference was soon noticeable.”

According to Wikipedia, one tablespoon of the *Moringa oleifera* leaf powder provides 14 percent of the protein, 40 percent of the calcium, 23 percent of the iron and most of the vitamin A children aged one to three need. Six tablespoons of leaf powder will provide nearly all of a woman’s daily iron and calcium needs during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Excited by the enormous potential of the versatile tree, Mathabatha involved her community in the Ga-Mphahlele project by founding an all-woman organisation called Sedikong sa Lerato in Tooseng. So far, 300 families and more than 350 orphaned and vulnerable children are being supported by the organisation.

The Ga-Mphahlele project is small but it continues to grow and just recently the women cleared more bush to make way for a further 3 000 trees to produce yet more of the nutritious powder for distribution among other economically depressed communities.

In October 2009, the women got further back-up from the University of Fort Hare when scientists visited the village to announce the results of a scientific analysis. Local people came forward to share what they had learned. They had personal experience of the trees’ beneficial effect on their children.

Other organisations recognised the benefit of the women’s work and became involved. Among them is the Southern Africa Trust that has joined Sedikong sa Lerato to roll-out a US\$20 000 (R143 364) project in other parts of South Africa.

There are plans to educate communities, small-scale farmers, traditional leaders, municipalities and government departments on the nutritional values of the Moringa tree.

Mathabatha has reason to be pleased. Her success story is typical of many in Africa where women are willing to tackle almost any project to produce food for their families.

Danielle Nierenberg, co-director of the international organisation Nourishing the Planet, points out that although woman farmers produce more than half of the food grown in the world – and roughly 1.6 billion women depend on agriculture for their livelihoods – they are often not able to benefit from general agriculture funding “because of the institutional and cultural barriers they face, including lack of access to land, credit and education”.

Worldwide, women receive only about 5 percent of agriculture extension services and own about 2 percent of land.

But, adds Nierenberg, research has shown that when women’s incomes are improved and when they have better access to education, infrastructure, credit and health care, they tend to invest more in the nutrition, education and health of their family, causing a ripple effect of benefits that can extend to the entire community.

Cheryl Morden, the director of the North American Liaison Office of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, believes that by providing agricultural funding there is “a big pay-off in focusing on women in the community’s struggle to alleviate hunger and poverty”.

The French NGO Solidarités reports that 1 000 women in Nairobi's largest slum who were given training and seed are now growing vegetable farms in sacks filled with dirt. These "vertical farms" are increasingly providing residents with food.

In Zambia, Veronica Sianchenge, a farmer in Kabuyu, improved her family's life when she bought a pressure pump through an NGO to irrigate her vegetable plot. Collecting water had previously taken hours each day. As a result her children are eating better and looking better.

In Rwanda, where 60 percent of students return to the rural areas to farm after graduating, they are being helped by the Farmers of the Future Initiative. Both girls and boys are benefiting because, says Josephine Tuyishimire, "it is important for young girls to learn these skills so that they can avoid dependence on men for food and financial security – and they can share what they learn".

It is estimated that today more people than ever – one billion, it's estimated – suffer from chronic hunger and food insecurity. This means that one in six people don't get enough nutrients as they work, go to school or care for their families.

Worst of all, food insecurity hits Africa harder than anywhere despite the fact that the majority of African people farm for their livelihoods. Assistance to help African agriculture has plummeted and farmers in sub-Saharan Africa are feeling the impact. According to Farmers of the Future, their yields and incomes have stagnated for 25 years – unlike elsewhere in the world. African farmers have identified this as a critical need.

Back in Limpopo, Mathabatha and her all-women organisation is hard at work trying to meet a growing demand for their Moringa powder. There are challenges. They don't have the equipment – or sufficient funds – to prepare the land. They have to grind the leaves by hand, a laborious process. But they know they are performing an invaluable job.

Mathabatha would like to see more subsistence farming in rural areas – even on a small scale. "This way no child or family will go to bed hungry." -

DID YOU KNOW?

Moringa oleifera is cultivated for its nutritious pods, leaves and flowers, and its ability to survive drought and poor soil. Its oil can be used for lighting or cooking, and it can even be used as fertiliser. Its seeds are an effective and cheap means of purifying water. It is also used in teas and beauty treatments.

No wonder it is known as the world's most useful tree.

DID YOU KNOW?

Roughly 1.6 billion woman farmers grow more than half the world's food, yet they own just 2 percent of the land and invariably have little access to resources such as credit and education. - The Star