Celebrity beans star as new crop for emerging farmers

SHELLEY SEID

IT is the new wonder crop for cash-flush A-list celebrities, even though it remains relatively unknown in South Africa. Health-obsessed former Spice Girl Victoria Beckham eats them, Oprah Winfrey endorses them, Jamie Oliver and Nigel Slater create recipes around them.

Now, edamame — the bright green beans that hail from China and are considered a superfood because they are high in protein, low in fat and packed with amino acids — are set to make a splash in South Africa as small-scale farmers plant them.

At the moment, South Africa imports edamame from Kenya and China. They are hard to spot, but can be found on the shelves in Woolworths or on the menu at upmarket restaurants like Cape Town’s Willoughby & Co.

Last month, the KwaZulu-Natal-based Edamame Development Programme — a pilot project between the nonprofit company Newlands Mashin and the eThekwini municipality — harvested its first edamame crop, which it sold to Food Lover’s Market and Oxford Fresh Markets.

Walter Coughlan, programme director of the Edamame Development Programme, said: “At the moment, we have nine harvestable hectares and our successes have been encouraging.”

This season, 34 emerging farmers, alongside 100 small-scale growers and the edamame research farm, produced seven tons of fresh beans and two-and-a-half tons of blanched and frozen beans.

Coughlan said the reality was that “edamame” was just a fancy name for young green soybeans.

But, he said, calling them “soya” brought to mind genetically modified animal feed, or a highly processed, often tasteless, meat substitute — “not the nutritious, protein-rich, super-sweet, non-GMO, bright green beans that are virtually unknown in South Africa”.

The project has the spin-off benefit of improving skills of small farmers. Coughlan said that focusing on a niche crop and using emerging farmers would help to create jobs and develop new farmers.

“The fact is we have so few — and dwindling — emerging farmer role models for new farmers to look up to. Despite land and resources, we seem to be moving away from growing a productive, small-scale agriculture industry,” he said.

The edamame farmers have managed to earn twice the fixed-commodity price they would have received for commercial soya beans.

Research has shown that poorer South Africans see the mature seed as an alternative to sugar beans, and the celebrity fanfare around edamame means there is a ready-made market among the rich.

Within the next three years, the aim is to move from nine to 100...
Celebrity beans star as new crop for emerging farmers

by Shelley Seid, April 27 2014, 09:01

MAGIC HANDFUL: Walter Coughlan, programme director of the Edamame Development Programme, harvests edamame beans in Mariannhill with farm support colleague Emanuel Kunene. Picture: JACKIE CLAUSEN

Related articles

- Research laboratory has its finger on pulses

IT is the new wonder crop for cash-flush A-list celebrities, even though it remains relatively unknown in South Africa. Health-obsessed former Spice Girl Victoria Beckham eats them, Oprah Winfrey endorses them, Jamie Oliver and Nigel Slater create recipes around them.

Now, edamame — the bright green beans that hail from China and are considered a superfood because they are high in protein, low in fat and packed with amino acids — are set to make a splash in South Africa as small-scale farmers plant them.

At the moment, South Africa imports edamame from Kenya and China. They are hard to spot, but can be found on the shelves in Woolworths or on the menu at upmarket restaurants like Cape Town’s Willoughby & Co.
Last month, the KwaZulu-Natal-based Edamame Development Programme — a pilot project between the nonprofit company Newlands Mashu and the eThekwini municipality — harvested its first edamame crop, which it sold to Food Lover’s Market and Oxford Fresh Markets.

Walter Coughlan, programme director of the Edamame Development Programme, said: “At the moment we have nine harvestable hectares and our successes have been encouraging.”

This season, 34 emerging farmers, alongside 100 small-scale growers and the edamame research farm, produced seven tons of fresh beans and two-and-a-half tons of blanched and frozen beans.

Coughlan said the reality was that “edamame” was just a fancy name for young, green soybeans.

But, he said, calling them “soya” brought to mind genetically modified animal feed, or a highly processed, often tasteless, meat substitute — “not the nutritious, protein-rich, super-sweet, non-GMO, bright green beans that are virtually unknown in South Africa”.

The project has the spin-off benefit of improving skills of small farmers.

Coughlan said that focusing on a niche crop and using emerging farmers would help to create jobs and develop new farmers.

“The fact is we have so few — and dwindling — emerging-farmer role models for new farmers to look up to. Despite land and resources, we seem to be moving away from growing a productive, small-scale agriculture industry,” he said.

The edamame farmers have managed to earn twice the fixed-commodity price they would have received for commercial soya beans.

Research has shown that poorer South Africans see the mature seed as an alternative to sugar beans, and the celebrity fanfare around edamame means there is a ready-made market among the rich.

Within the next three years, the aim is to move from nine to 100 hectares of produce to harvest up to 500 tons.

There are also plans to develop a snack market that includes beans covered in dark chocolate and yoghurt, and savoury, roasted mature edamame beans — an alternative to peanuts, but with twice the protein and half the fat.

“We will be marketing nationally next year,” said Coughlan. “There is no doubt the initiative is gaining traction.”

*This article was first published in Sunday Times: Business Times*