AGRICULTURE Weekly issue

RFMF OFFICERS UNDERTAKE MUSHROOM FARMING

Thirty-five Republic of Fiji Military Officers (RFMF) harvested their first lot of mushrooms yesterday (29.10.21) after successfully completing a two-day training last week.

RFMF Chief of Staff Operations, Lt. Col. Lepani Damuni said the COVID-19 lockdown in April had postponed this training and when the restrictions were finally lifted, he reached out again to the Ministry of Agriculture to request that it continued as initially planned.

"We were given two days to conduct this mushroom training. Initially, there were 68 RFMF personnel that gave their names for training but when it started, there were only 35. I still think that's a good number," he said.

He added mushroom farming was still one of the best ways for soldiers to continue further when they retired from the Military.

RFMF personnel planting substrates.

"It's what we call here, 'Military for Life' concept; when we retire, we have something to fall back on. So, this is something that the soldiers can look forward when they walk out of this gate when they turn 55," Lt Col Damuni explained.

The Chief of Staff Operations added mushroom farming was similar to smart farming where it was less strenuous but high output.

As part of their training, the officers held a practical session.

"We dug a small plot in front of my quarters where we planted 71 substrates and after ten days we will harvest. That will be on October 29," Lt Col Damuni said.

Training Facilitator and Ministry of Agriculture Principal Research Officer – Landuse, Dr Tekini Nakidakida explained the mushroom training was under the Juncao Technology Program which was basically a type of versatile grass.

One of the objectives of the Juncao Technology project, Dr Nakidakida added, was to turn this versatile grass into powder and use it to grow mushrooms, rather than to cut down trees to grow mushrooms.

"Mushrooms have a short term lifecycle. It's very high value and it can create a huge impact on the livelihoods for our rural people or our most vulnerable, especially in this changing climate. People may not have land to grow their crops or they might have land, but it might be degraded land or saline, with very high salt. So in a very small unit area, you do not need soil to grow mushrooms; all you need is that substrate. Families can earn what those with big farms earn," he said.

Principal Research Officer Dr. Tekini Nakidakida conducting Mushroom training.

In terms of the training, Dr Nakidakida said the Military officers were taught the environment conditions mushrooms grew best in, how to care for it using an in-door system in a controlled environment, which was easier to manage and harvest with very little loss expected.

He said the trained officers have decided to use container production for their mushroom and were finalizing their plans on how best it was to be executed.

BACTERIUM CULTURE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

A Naitasiri farmer who practices smart agriculture using traditional farming tools is amazed by the outcome of using a Ministry of Agriculture-specially prepared solution for organic farming for his English cabbages.

Eloni Nadedede, 68, lives in Navai, up in the highlands of Nadarivatu and has dedicated more than half his life to farming.

Speaking in i-taukei, Eloni said in all his years of farming he had not seen any changes except when he tried out the Bacterium Culture solution for compost preparing for organic farming developed by the Ministry and launched last year by the Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment, Hon. Dr Mahendra Reddy.

He explained he only tried out for the first time a few months back when the Ministry's locality officer also brought him English cabbage seeds to plant. He said like the Bacterium Culture, it was also his first time to plant English cabbage. After the seeds germinated, he transplanted it onto his ready plots. He said it was during the transplant that he used the Bacterium Culture and he could see the difference when the cabbages started growing. Eloni said the cabbages were bigger, healthier and grew well.

He only used poultry manure on his farm and even then, he did so sparingly. He said the land he tilled was still fertile and therefore did not need much fertilizer.

In terms of smart agriculture, there were two ways in which Eloni practiced this. One was through his maximum and allocated use of land around his home for specific vegetables. Neat, was the most apt description of his farm, when the Ministry of Agriculture Information Team visited him. Eloni had small manageable plots of carrots, English cabbage, Chinese cabbage, French beans, spring onions; bananas were planted in neat rows. Another way of practicing smart agriculture was through intercropping, where for instance, he planted English cabbages between his cassava crops. He said he liked experimenting.

Due to the climate conditions experienced in Nadarivatu, his four main commodities were carrots, Chinese cabbage, spring onion, and French beans. However, he also plants vudi, dalo, and kumala.

He lives by his simple farm tools – cane knives and digging forks. He explained in all his 36 years of farming those were the only tools he used, no other machinery; even during land preparation activities, he preferred his trusted cane knife and digging fork.

He said he had always been farming in the same area, rotating from one area to another within the vicinity. Eloni explained it was easier to have a small area to farm as it was easier to manage and keep clean. He believed if one was to look after his or her land, utilize it wisely, and be passionate about working it, then the land would look after you.

Eloni said it was through farming that he has been able to look after his six grandchildren including a set of adopted twins. He also managed to extend his home, and bought some other farming equipment like a wheelbarrow, chainsaw, and two brush cutters.

He was employed as a driver of big trucks and left it to take up farming. He said there was no substitution for farming as one became their own boss. However, time management and strictly sticking to a daily schedule was important to ensure one succeeded in farming.

Eloni was assisted with a water tank under the Nadarivatu Development Program. The objectives of this Program was to improve the production of high value vegetables through better infrastructure and the introduction of smart farming techniques to meet the tourism market and local food demand; and to capitalize on the unique climatic conditions in Nadarivatu which could grow vegetables during the off-seasons.

The Highlands Farming Program is the new program that replaces the Nadarivatu Development Program and is included in the Ministry's 2021-2022 Budget with the intention to facilitate the expansion of crop production through infrastructure improvement to potential farming areas in the highlands.

The objectives of the Highlands Farming Program are to improve market access to the rural farming communities through the provision of infrastructure development that will stimulate socio-economic growth in terms of mass production of commodities such as dalo, yams, pulses and assorted vegetables; and to modernize agriculture by providing assistance to potential commercial farmers through the procurement of farm machines, agro inputs, draft animals and implements.

Eloni Nadedede at his English cabbage plot.