

GET IT RIGHT >> EXPERTS SHOULD BE PART OF THE WHATSAPP GROUP FOR ACCURACY

Are you on a farmers' WhatsApp group? It is my easy way to network

Jotham Kariuki gets information on price, diseases and market through the social media group

BY EVA DE VRIES
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The farm, located on the hills surrounding Nyeri, is hidden between large banana trees and a maize plantation.

It is drizzling when we arrive. Tiny drops of water become little pools on top of the leaves. Thirty-one-year-old Jotham Kariuki inspects his *sukuma wiki* (collard greens) plants in the rain as his bright yellow jacket prevents him from getting wet.

He checks the roots and removes some aged leaves from the plants.

"My parents advised me to study clinical medicine since I was a young boy, but I wanted to become a farmer. After my studies in 2010, I started running this farm. I prefer to be my own boss and make decisions myself. But above all, farming is my passion," says Kariuki, who farms on 1.5 acres.

Besides vegetables, he also grows bananas, maize, coffee, mangoes and avocados. He also keeps about some 12 chickens and a few cows and goats, which enable him to sell eggs and milk.

To start, he got a loan from the Youth Enterprise Development Fund, about Sh300,000 and added Sh200,000 from his savings.

"I started with tomatoes, *sukuma wiki*, eggplant and capsicum. The fruits and animals came later. Greenhouse tomato farming turned out to be most difficult, especially in the beginning."

The challenges he experienced with greenhouse, which included diseases, pushed him to seek advice from fellow farmers, and together, they formed WhatsApp and Facebook groups, which have become instrumental in their ventures.

"Our WhatsApp group consists mainly of young farmers, over 100 of us. We share experiences, ask questions and get advice on how to manage diseases and how to do pest management. We also seek best market through the group and on Facebook"



HOW TO MAKE THE GROUPS WORK

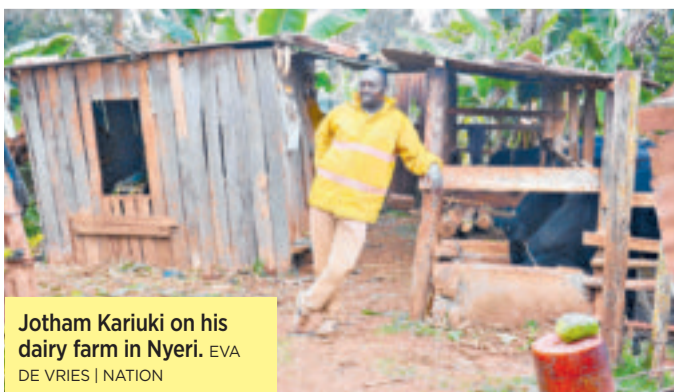
1. WhatsApp group should be backed by the support of experts in diverse fields of agriculture, animal husbandry and horticulture.
2. Experts supply information through WhatsApp to the group administrator, who then shares the advice to farmers.
3. But that is incase the experts are not part of the group. They can also be.
4. The groups enable a free exchange of information among the farmers.

So instrumental is the WhatsApp group, on which extension officers too belong, that Kariuki never struggles to get information about farming.

"We share contacts of companies that sell pesticides and seeds at good prices. My network has grown a lot since I joined the group. For a young farmer, this is the way to go," says Kariuki.

Leaning against the wooden shed where the cows are eating their forage, Kariuki checks his phone.

He quickly slides with his fin-



Jotham Kariuki on his dairy farm in Nyeri. EVA DE VRIES | NATION

Jotham Kariuki on his farm in Nyeri. The farmer practices mixed farming. EVA DE VRIES | NATION

ger across the screen and shows a picture of coffee beans.

"I posted this picture on our WhatsApp group and asked whether the crop was ready for harvest, and was told to wait for about a month by an experienced farmer."

Even though Kariuki wouldn't want to do anything else at the moment, he reckons farming is not always easy.

"The prices are too low, people don't pay enough for the products and this really needs to change," he argues.

Then there are also diseases. "Bacterial wilt is the most stubborn. Sometimes you see it when the crop already has roots, and you cannot do anything. The best way to prevent is to have a hygienic farm, especially in the greenhouse, and have the right equipment. Most vulnerable crops are eggplant, tomatoes, cucumber and capsicum."

He further points out access

to capital is limited. "It definitely improved in the last couple of years, but it is still a major challenge to get an affordable loan from the bank to grow business," says Kariuki as he carries the last boxes with products in the boot of his car.

He luckily has his own vehicle, which enables him to take the produce to the market himself.

His main market is in Nyeri, but some produce he sells in his neighborhood.

A kilo of tomatoes goes for Sh60 while *sukuma wiki* Sh20 a bunch and cucumber Sh50 a kilo.

Kariuki points towards a piece of yet undeveloped land next to where the vegetables grow.

"I will soon start growing tomatoes here. People really like tomatoes, we cannot even meet the demand." He recently employed two boys who assist him on the farm.

Erick Ogumo, the chairman of Society of Crop Agribusiness Advisor (SOCAA), said that farmers can effectively use WhatsApp to network and share information on market, prices, pests and diseases outbreak in addition to mobile consultancy.

"Such networks are good for today's farmers because they can send photos of pests and diseases to experts for diagnosis and technical advice, making it easier to know in case there is an outbreak of disease," he said, adding this kind of consultancy, however, requires very skilled agronomists.

The A-Z of raising quality dairy goat kids, from birth to maturity

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As any other young animal, dairy goat kids are the future of a farm. Therefore, management should aim at fostering a fast-growing, healthy herd.

The journey begins at birth. The kid is new to the environment, therefore, the surrounding should be clean and free of germs. Immediately after birth, the first thing to check for is if the newborn is breathing with ease. Remove all the mucus from the nose and around the mouth for good breathing.

Then treat the navel with iodine to prevent disease-causing organisms from reaching the navel cord. This also helps in rapid drying, and eventual breaking away of the cord from the navel.

The next critical step is feeding. Feed the newborn with colostrum as soon as possible, preferably within the first 24 hours of birth when they can absorb the essential antibodies.

This is the first "food" for the young one that acts as a laxative in the digestive tract, provides an excellent source of nutrients and contains antibodies that protect the newborns from harmful bacteria and viruses, until their own immune system begins to function. This normally happens between three to eight weeks. It is high in nutrients including vitamins A, B, proteins and minerals. Kids that do not receive colostrum become less resistant to diarrhoea and other ailments later as they grow.

If colostrum is not available at all, may be due to mastitis on the doe, then whole milk is an alternative. If not left to suckle, colostrum can be nipple fed to the kid to ensure adequate consumption.

After about two days of colostrum, feed the kid on pasteurised goat's milk. Some farmers prefer to alternate this with milk replacers or feeds both at the same time at half rate a piece. This continues up to weaning.

Though goats are small ruminants, the kid's digestive system is not fully developed at birth. As they grow, about two to three weeks of birth, introduce fibrous forages and other solid foods like grains, sweet potato vines, leaves of legume trees, grass, hay or concentrates.

These encourage rumen development together with



the muscles of the rumen wall, which is important in digestion and mixing of rumen contents. The kid also starts chewing cud.

At this stage, most farmers prefer substituting fresh doe's milk with milk replacers. Note that milk replacers of poor quality, especially with high starch levels will restrict growth rate of the kid. Fats in the milk replacer that are not properly homogenised also contribute to poor performance of the kids. As part of feeding, remember to always provide clean water and mineral salts.

Weaning

At this stage, the kids may experience weaning shock often characterised by slowing of growth and sometimes loss of weight. The degree of shock, however, relies on the age, weight and the feeding programme before weaning, thus, the need for close care and handling.

Weaning is defined by more reliance on solid feeds to supply most of the goat's nutrients and achieved best gradually. Early weaning can be done at six weeks with late weaning up to 12 weeks of age.

Housing

Set a separate space for the kids within the goat housing. They should be housed in a barn that is clean, warm and has dry bedding.

The floor can be made from cheaply available material like timber and spaced to allow wastes and urine to pass through. Proper ventilation is also necessary to prevent respiratory problems.

Under these conditions, the kids attain optimal growth rate, feed efficiency and stay healthy.

The writer is based at Egerton University. For further information on raising dairy goat kids, visit www.dairycloud.co.ke to download an extension newsletter by the university.