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Essential Oils Prove Profitable for South African Farmers

Winrock International

Improving Lives and Livelihoods Worldwide



Mama Msweli meets with mentor Jim Parker to discuss additional land she is interested in developing with rose geranium.

Mama Msweli has been a sugarcane farmer for many years, but due to theft and a failing market for small-holder farmers she decided to see what other crops could be produced on her land. Her husband told her about a project—funded by the W.K. Kellogg and Ford foundations and located in Melmoth, KwaZulu-Natal—teaching emerging farmers to grow essential oils, and after contacting the Winrock International-implemented project, a training time was set up for Msweli and her family. Seven people received training in rose geranium production as well as business management, a critical part of agrobusiness and a skill that is generally lacking in South Africa's emerging farmers.

A commitment was made to support Msweli in the initial development of

her land, with Winrock offering soil sampling and lime for her half-hectare plot with the expectation she would eventually develop a full hectare of rose geranium, as well as more than 10,000 rose geranium seedlings, on her own. And although Msweli's first set of cuttings died due to summer heat and humidity, she was not discouraged. Many trials were made to partially shade the cuttings, but that too proved unsuccessful.

After these first failed attempts, the weather cooled and Msweli's next attempts were far more successful, with at least 60 percent of the cuttings establishing roots. She produced enough seedlings to fill part of her field, which still needed to be properly prepared. To pay for the preparation of half a hectare, she cut and sold timber from her land. Msweli was given lime to adjust the soil pH, and was provided with additional seedlings that were being developed at a local nursery. After preparing and planting the seedlings in rows across the slope, Msweli has now been successfully growing rose geranium in her field for many months.

Sustainability in development work is not finished after a field is established. Local Winrock staff members have visited her periodically over the past year, and Jim Parker, a commercial essential oils farmer in the area, has taken on the role of Msweli's mentor. They have visited each other's farms several times, and she has learned much from Parker, who also has a distillation unit on his farm. Msweli has processed her plant material there

and added value to her production. She recently sold her oil to the same marketer Parker sells to, making about US\$231 from her first harvest. Msweli plans to use the information and original stock material from Winrock to scale up her work to at least a full hectare, where she can make a US\$125 profit on her work per month.

While her work will not make her rich, it will improve Msweli's livelihood and will allow her granddaughters to start attending school. She has become a model farmer in the area and has hosted several farmer-to-farmer exchanges at her home. Msweli has been very motivated to change her crops, and knows first-hand how successful rose geranium farming can be accomplished.



Mama Msweli's first successful field of rose geranium.



Members of the Msweli family use the training received from Winrock's essential oils project to prepare rose geranium cuttings for planting.

Winrock International is a nonprofit organization that works with people in the United States and around the world to empower the disadvantaged, increase economic opportunity, and sustain natural resources.