

GENARIUM FARMING IS TRANSFORMING FARMERS' LIVES IN SOLIO, LAIKIPIA COUNTY

By George Njugi – Field Conservation Coordinator
August 2020

Solio is in Laikipia County and it was acquired from the Larger Solio Game Ranch which is situated at the leeward side of Mt. Kenya. Solio is relatively flat, predominated with black cotton soils, and experiences binomial rainfall with an annual average of about 700 mm per year. It, therefore, has a semi-arid condition with very high temperatures at daytime and very cold at night with severe frosts. Since this was a game ranch, and still boulders the remaining part of Solio Ranch and Olpejeta Game Ranch, the wild animals keep on making good attempts to come back looking for pastures and thus causing human-wildlife conflicts. During daytime you could find gazelles and Zebras feeding freely on uncultivated farms while elephants strike at night.



Robert Karimi Macharia is a youthful small-scale farmer who lives with his wife and two children on their half an acre plot in Rehema village- Solio. He was among the over three thousand evictees from Mount Kenya and Aberdare forests. Later, they were resettled in Solio by the Government of Kenya in 2010.

On their newly found home, Robert's family practiced subsistence food crops such as potatoes, beans, and maize. However, when rains were heavy, his farm got waterlogged and he lost his crops. When the rains were below normal, his crop would not reach maturity and he abandoned farming on his plot and chose to do casual labor on other people's farm to support his family.



In 2017, with the help of the Upper Tana Nairobi Water Fund, he excavated a water pan and installed a dam liner. He was then able to harvest 50,000 liters of stormwater in his water pan. Robert also excavated soil and water conservation terraces on his farm to improve drainage. He then planted kales and spinach on a quarter of the plot. Robert would then supply

vegetables to the entire village and earned just about Kshs 1,000 from the sales each week. Motivated by the income he was getting, a need to diversify production on his farm to increase his proceeds arose. He was among the first six farmers chosen to explore the suitability of geranium as a cash crop for Solio. Robert received 5,000 cuttings of rose geranium from Horizon Business Ventures Ltd (HBV) in February 2018 and planted it on his farm. In that season, the rains were extremely heavy and only less than 200 of

the cuttings survived. Three months later, each of the shrubs gave over a kg of biomass at harvesting time. Each kilo of geranium goes for Kshs.15

Robert is optimistic and appreciates that the shrub will earn him a reliable income to support his family in comparison to any other crops that he had planted before. Now, he has increased the area under geranium to a quarter of an acre through intercropping with his maize and vegetables. He hopes to put the entire plot under the essential oil shrub once given a planting schedule by the HBV.

In the year 2019, he harvested 1000 kg earning Ksh 15,000 which is paid within 3 days after the harvest. In the current year 2020, he has harvested twice in March and July and realized 1474kg of rose geranium leaves giving him an income of Ksh 22,110.

“I have never got such amount of income from one crop in such a small area and short time. The labor has been minimal with no tilling, no fertilizer, no chemicals, no wildlife, and the only work is harvesting.” Says Karimi.

He also has propagated over 100,000 cuttings of rose geranium for sale during the next planting season. He has a tree nursery where he is nurturing geranium seedlings and hopes to replicate the success on his four-acre farm in the same area.

The Upper Tana Nairobi Water Fund has plans to support the farmer in marketing his geranium cutting in collaboration with HBV so that more farmers from the area will benefit from subsidized cuttings.