



Female farming power

by Hanlie du Plessis

Linda Nghatsane from Mpumalanga is the worthy winner of the 2006 Female Farmer of the Year award. "I never expected to win, in fact, I would not have entered if it was not for the extension officers that insisted that I should," she says.

The Female Farmer of the Year competition has been running for eight years with entries from all nine provinces. The 2006 awards ceremony took place in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal on 26 August. Linda was chosen out of 34 finalists from across the country. She also won the category "Top Producer for Informal Markets" and won R65 000 in prize money.

From nursing to farming

This remarkable woman's interest in agriculture was born out of her need to eradicate malnutrition among small children. Linda is a nurse by profession. For her caring and educating comes naturally. She lectured at a nursing college until 1990 and travelled throughout Africa to uplift communities. She taught them life-skills and showed them how to produce their own food.

Linda says that being poor is no excuse for malnutrition – there are lots of children from wealthy families who do not eat balanced meals. She says it is important to group the different foods into three colour groups, one of each on your plate. This will provide a child with a well-balanced meal.

In March 2004 she bought a piece of the farm De Hoop in the Mara district between Nelspruit and Kaapmuiden. The piece of land was overgrown with Lowveld vegetation. Most of the deforestation



One of Linda's poultry houses



Oyster mushrooms are cultivated on Linda's farm

was done manually, until a friendly neighbour offered the use of his machines. Today the farm has four poultry houses, strawberries and different vegetables under shade-net. There is also a small hothouse in which Linda produces oyster mushrooms.

She sells approximately 3 000 chickens per month to hawkers from the area. The vegetables, oyster mushrooms and strawberries are sold to supermarkets in Nelspruit and its surrounds. Linda recently lost a big contract for oyster mushrooms, because her facility is too small to meet the demand. She plans to use her prize money to build a state of the art growing room for the mushrooms. ABSA is going to assist her with financing for this project. Next time Linda will be able to accept a big contract.

Learning and giving

Even though Linda is a wonderful educator, she is also an eager student. She believes that one is never too old to learn. In 2003 she went to Zimbabwe with her husband. There she learned how to plant vegetables in a bag (see our article on page 15 about this technique). She also learned how to cultivate oyster mushrooms. In 2005, she even obtained her Masters Degree in Public Health at the University of Pretoria!

Even though she is a hands-on farmer, she says that success would have been impossible without her hard-working and loyal farm workers. She has four permanent employees and each is responsible for a chicken house. Linda's parents are very proud of their daughter. They are still farming on the same piece of land in Limpopo where Linda was born 46 years ago. Linda is convinced that she inherited her business skills from her mother.

Her advice to other female farmers, especially those in rural areas, is:

- Break the chain of dependency
- Know where you want to go with your business
- Start small and expand when you are able to
- Make use of the knowledge offered by others
- Give back to your community by teaching others what you know.

It is clear that winning this award is not the end of Linda Nghatsane's story. This is merely the beginning. She is building three more poultry houses which she plans to have in full production by December, in time for the festive season. She also hopes to start building the new facilities for her oyster mushrooms very soon.

One senses that progress is inevitable on the farm of Linda Nghatsane. *Ubisi Mail* promises to keep readers informed of this inspiring woman's business ventures. **UM**