

## Alva Anderson – a young Jamaican agri-preneur set for success



Alva Anderson  
Jamaican youth agri-preneur

At age 31, Alva Anderson is already a successful agri-preneur. Alva grew up in a farming family in Guy's Hill, St. Mary, Jamaica. He inherited his passion for agriculture from his father, a farmer, but Alva tells us, he was not brought up to farm. In the last 5 years however, this young entrepreneur has built a booming agri-business for himself, expanding up to 10 acres, some of which is family-owned, some leased and some rented. On this land, Alva plants banana and sweet potato crops in addition to raising cattle. As a trained accountant and small business owner, Alva uses to these skills to make his agri-business profitable.

*"I researched the industry and saw the potential – along with looking back on my dad's life – and I made the decision to go into agriculture."*

Initially he was shocked at the actual physical labor involved and struggled having to sell all his crops to 'higglers' (middlemen) while he built enough resources and made direct connections with buyers. *"Some higglers know you don't know the game – and they take advantage of you."* Currently, Alva has a contract with a banana chip factory and his sweet potato crops are either sold to higglers at the Coronation Market, to a consolidator, or for export to the US or UK markets. Alva decided to grow sweet potatoes as a commercial crop after meeting Mr. Alvin Murray, the WUSC Caribbean Regional Agriculture Coordinator for PROPEL, at the Denbigh Agricultural Show in 2014. He was encouraged to participate in the technical programs offered through the extension services of the Rural Agricultural Development Authority

(RADA) with the support of WUSC Caribbean. This led Alva to pursue sweet potatoes as one of his main crops. Through the National Sweet Potato Program, implemented by Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture and Fisheries (MICAFA) with the support of PROPEL, Alva was given access to clean planting material, technical assistance, and marketing support. He also attended the RADA/PROPEL farmer field schools, where he learned best agricultural practices as related to land preparation, pest control, soil care, harvesting, and post-harvest management. Alva was also linked with a consolidator that supplies restaurants and supermarkets.

*"The first time I ever planted the sweet potato – the motivation was there; I made a profit. If it wasn't for PROPEL – I may have planted sweet potato – but I wouldn't have gotten the results. PROPEL instructed me to get a special blend – the Jamaican Beauregard triple super phosphate blend as a fertilizer for sweet potato plants. Based on the technical assistance I got, my crops came out much better than other crops in the region."*

After experiencing substantial growth in profits and seeing the potential in commercializing his crops, Alva sought to further establish and expand his enterprise. The positive yield results motivated his decision to continue investing in the production of sweet potatoes. Indeed, Alva reports he has managed to get 100% return on investment from his production of sweet potatoes in the past 2 years. In addition to applying best practices in growing and harvesting his crops, the techniques he learned for post-harvest management through PROPEL have significantly impacted his yield.

*"The training I got from PROPEL definitely helped minimize post-harvest losses; things like information about rat infestation, worm infestation. For example – we do manual harvest – with hand forks – and we got training on how to harvest – how to place the hand forks so as not to harm the tubers."*

He reports that he has reaped over 10,800 pounds from 1 acre of land during his first harvest, with only 265 pounds of post-harvest loss. Since then, his post-harvest losses have dropped even further.

Despite rapid expansion, Alva still faces challenges that limit the scope of how fast he can expand. He has limited access to credit from input providers and financial institutions and lamented,

*“We are small farmers – so the access to suppliers is not the same as with larger farmers. If we had a better relationship with them, we could do more – but we have to operate within the confines of the agreements.”*

While his relationship with his input providers has progressed over the years, allowing him today to obtain inputs on credit, there is only so much he can obtain at a given time.

Other challenges include access to information about prices, in what is still largely an informal sector. Alva accesses current crop prices through MICAFA’s webpage, however sometimes the regional context may affect these prices. Alva also relies on his neighbors by asking around how much they are selling their crops for, and he also gets farm-gate prices from his RADA extension officer. Mostly, however, Alva tells us that the key to his success is always putting pen to paper, calculating how much he should be selling his crops for in view of his cost of production. The combination of these strategies has resulted in a successful enterprise that continues to grow.

Alva is driven to legitimize his agri-business and standardize his practices. He tells us he keeps detailed records of all financial transactions and activities that take place in his fields. As a trained accountant, he feels everything should be recorded from a business end. In addition, he feels that streamlining his practices further will significantly enhance his productivity and contribute to even larger returns.

*“I’m not satisfied – I would like my farm business to be more structured. I want it to be a registered business – where I can actually look at my business paper-wise – and see well, this is what it looks like – and see that it is profitable. It would help should I approach a bank or a supplier – they would want some sort of paperwork.”*

Passionate about the agriculture sector, Alva recommends that youth wanting to get into the agriculture field approach it as a business,

*“Do thorough research on the agriculture field – then you will know if you have the capability to be successful. You need some background, and the willingness to learn and put in the work to succeed.”*

Alva tells us that he plans to become a distributor within the next five years:

*“I want to have an established business between producers, agro-processors, buyers, HVMs – and eventually the export market”.*

However, he believes more effort needs to be aimed at getting Jamaicans to buy local, instead of imported fresh produce. He also says a renewed effort needs to be made to legitimize agriculture, to encourage young people to join the sector. He suggests professional market training for farmers and farmer hopefuls – especially youth, who are desperate for the business development skills necessary to ensure their success in the changing economy of agriculture.



Alva (far right) attending a PROPEL youth in agriculture focus group in September 2016

Today, Alva’s fresh produce business is thriving. A champion for youth in agriculture, Alva has produced greater yields every year he has been in business. With his plans for expansion, soon enough Alva will not only produce even more healthy, sustainable food for the HVMs, but also provide more employment and infrastructure for his community and his peers.