

“Always an innovator”, Ranita Shivprasad transitions from teacher to successful farmer learning valuable lessons on sustainable agriculture along the way



Ranita Shivprasad proudly displays her plantain harvest

Ranita Shivprasad began farming in 2010 in Blairmont Estate, West Coast Berbice, the year that Guyana’s Agriculture Minister announced a national strategic plan based on the empowerment of women through agricultural trade. Before launching her farming enterprise, Ranita had been teaching part time and raising her family while her husband, a mechanic, had a full time job away from home. She didn’t come from a farming background but took up the challenge.

To get into production, Ranita and several farmers in the area approached the Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) to utilize abandoned sugar cane land for cultivation. GuySuCo agreed to allow the farmers to cultivate on the land without a lease and she was allocated five acres. *“I got land, machines came in and everyone shared resources. I started with pumpkins and some cash crops,”* she said. However GuySuCo is unable to supply water at certain times, *“So we decided on a long term crop that doesn’t need water. That was plantains.”* Shortly after planting: *“We had Black Sigatoka Disease, and barely got five leaves. The stocks were very small. I was depressed and wanted to give up. I had planted four or five acres of over 2000 plantains and these were also not looking good.”*

Renita is introduced to Sustainable Agriculture and Environmentally Friendly Inputs

It was then, in 2016, that she met WUSC Caribbean extension worker, Leslie Lewis who invited her to a PROPEL supported Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture information sharing session in Georgetown where a Canadian company, Health 2000 (H2K) Agro was introducing its line of organic products and their benefits to the environment. As part of that session, it was discussed that along with good agricultural practice the H2K products can also be used to manage the Black Sigatoka Disease. *“I came back and tried some of their products (H2K) on a small plot and saw the results right away.”* She then bought enough products to use on a larger scale: *“I now have taller, greener leaves and I think the trunks of the plantains are larger.”* H2K’s organic pest management products interested Ranita because, *“it is more environmentally friendly and unlike the agro chemicals, I had seen results using these H2K products.”* She notes that the H2K products are more expensive than other conventional synthetic products but *“it doesn’t make sense to spend \$10,000 with no results, I would rather spend \$15,000 and see results – though other farmers might say the cost is too high.”* At the same time, *“I have to go large to see enough profits when I use H2K. On a small scale it won’t work.”*

Ranita’s plantain farming continues to provide her family *“a steady stream of income.”* She doesn’t keep track of her profits, though she gauges when she has covered her expenses and she keeps track of dates related to planting, caring for her crops, and harvesting. Ranita sells her highest quality plantains at the Rosignol market and others to an agro processor who produces plantain flour.



Renita Takes on the Challenge of a New Crop - Onions

Given the help she received through PROPEL with her plantains, Ranita readily agreed to participate in PROPEL's onion trial in September 2016, when she was approached by WUSC Caribbean extension worker Jason Persaud. At the beginning she faced some challenges with germination. With support from PROPEL she learned about sowing the seeds in trays and transplanting to help protect the seeds and mitigate against climate risks which result in higher yields. Finally in May, she was ready to transplant her seedlings, but it was the beginning of the rainy season.

"Because of the rain I had a minimum amount of sunlight. But the seedlings were strong, they were stiff and tall and that helped."

With her insights from the environmentally sustainable agriculture sessions, Ranita was curious to know whether the loam soil type in her backyard was sufficient for growing onions. She went ahead and planted a patch in the backyard, which she augmented with organic matter, i.e., paddy (rice) hulls and pen manure. She also planted a patch of seedlings in a different type of soil. She noted that the backyard patch recorded vigorous growth while the other patch she planted, which was not augmented with organic matter, recorded weak growth.



Renita tries her hand at growing onions

Ranita was able to harvest about 15 pounds of onions which were sold to neighbours. Ranita said that **from the onion trial she learned some key lessons: one about the timing for planting and using transplanted seedlings, second about the importance of soil quality and organic soil content and thirdly, the potential impact of organic agricultural inputs in successfully growing onions.**

"If I was going to do it again, I would look at the weather patterns, and maybe set seeds in the rainy season so when they are ready to transplant there would be sun... also I haven't had a soil test on my farm, which I need so I can tell where to plant the onions."

With each crop and each harvest, Ranita learns more and more. Despite many setbacks, Ranita has become a successful farmer.

Today Ranita is part of a PROPEL mentorship program where she shares her experiences and knowledge of sustainable agricultural best practice with other women farmers. She says she can **"count on PROPEL"**, and for his part, WUSC Caribbean extension worker Jason Persaud says Ranita embraces technology: **"She is always an innovator, which is why we selected her to be a mentor to other women farmers."**