

Organic farming slowly catching on

Ilse Schoonraad

At the recent Nelson Mandela University (NMU) seminar on organic farming, Professor Raymond Auerbach, NMU professor in soil science and plant production, was lauded as one of the best mentors in the country.

Kobus Pienaar, Woolworths Foods Farming For the Future expert and Good Business Journey manager, said NMU's research into organic farming yields, soil types and water usage is invaluable. "The NMU students are fortunate to be able to conduct their research under the leadership of Prof Auerbach - one of the few organic farming proponents and experts who is open to debate."

Speaking at the Garden Route Botanical Garden Environmental Education Centre on 25 January, Pienaar said the most important aspect agricultural research should investigate is how to prevent plant disease and pests. "Can it be done? Unfortunately the prevention of disease and pests is not in the interest of the manufacturers of chemicals."

He said the core business of many companies who produce genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is not seeds, but pesticides. "GMO crops are developed to sell chemicals. You lose your guarantee if you don't spray the crops. Nonetheless, there are also good developments coming from GMO producers. The organic industry and

the GMO companies should get together and talk."

Auerbach said that just 300 farmers produce 40% of the food in South Africa. "This is quite risky as you only need to take a few hundred farmers out of business to create a massive food shortage." He said the organic food industry is a very slow growing market in South Africa, but now that consumers are becoming more aware of health issues, demand for organic produce is increasing.

The NMU organic farming systems trials are reaping results. "In 2017 we were in our third year and the organic system outyielded the conventional farming system. It takes time for the soil to become biologically alive, but once this is achieved, organic farming produces an excellent crop with major health benefits and the water retention is better."

As trustee of the Garden Route Botanical Garden Trust, Auerbach is delegated to help manage the Garden Route Environmental Education Centre and is planning to approach the Prince of Wales in the hope of securing extra funding for research. Prince Charles is a great organic farming enthusiast and the royal's own Duchy brand is now worth £200-million.

Should Auerbach secure the funding, he will continue with both organic research and environmental education activities. The principles of organic farming will also be rolled out to the disadvantaged areas in



Speakers and students at the NMU organic seminar on 25 February are, from left: Marike Swanepoel (NMU student), N'wa-Jama Mashele (NMU student), Kobus Pienaar (Woolworths Food Farming for the Future expert), Sidney Haddad (S Haddad Agricultural Services), Professor Raymond Auerbach (professor in soil science and plant production at NMU), Catherine Eckert (NMU student) and Tebogo Sebake (NMU student). *Photo: Ilse Schoonraad*

George, continuing with the Kos en Fynbos initiative, and learners will be exposed to the science behind organics at the Garden Route Environmental Education Centre.

