

How a small-scale farmer expanded his backyard business into one now supplying Africa's biggest retailer

South African farmer Kepas CB Melodi started his business by spotting a gap in the market - and, aided by the hands-on approach of the buying team at Shoprite and Checkers, he was able to ride the unpredictable wave of Covid-19 almost unscathed.

The relationships forged between buyers and farmers like Melodi help to create a degree of certainty in an often unpredictable industry, and because of this Melodi says he has a better idea of when, and what, to plant in order to reap maximum benefits from the land.

Melodi's story of hard work, ingenuity, and perseverance began many years before Covid-19, however - when he noticed there was a shortage of spinach at the fresh produce market in Hazyview, where he worked. He decided then that there must be demand for the product - and started farming it in his backyard.

He began by selling his spinach to fresh produce markets and through hawkers - channels that made revenue collection and planting challenging and sporadic.

"When stock was flooded at the market and the buyer could not take everything from me, I would have to try to sell my excess stock, which was challenging from a collection point of view, and a lot went to waste," Melodi explains.

But this unpredictability changed in 2012, when the entrepreneur started supplying a few crates of green beans and mielies to select Shoprite and Checkers stores in the region.

"My business is working so much better now. I can supply the buyers with what they want, and the proceeds of my hard work are going directly into the bank," he says.

Melodi now regularly supplies green beans, chillies and butternut to hundreds of Shoprite and Checkers stores in the Gauteng region, and the working relationship with his buyer, Khutso Rapudubudu, means he is always kept informed. This, Melodi says, is particularly critical during the planning phase of his farming operation.

"Khutso and the team give me information on market-related issues, and will suggest that I plant certain products when they have been scarce. They advise us on opportunities, letting us know when they are short of this or that, when farmers elsewhere couldn't supply the products," says Melodi.

"They also help me look at environmental issues, such as crop cycles, and make informed decisions," Melodi says.

But it's his hard work, knowledge, and experience - and the longstanding relationship with the Shoprite Group - that has proven particularly critical during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when many entrepreneurs have been unable to continue.

"This year, this relationship has helped me a lot - and for me, nothing has changed significantly. I have a good relationship with Shoprite, and I speak to them often. I wouldn't be where I am today without them. When I plant, I have some certainty and know where I am taking it," he says.

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