

Mnavu

Introduction

African nightshades, also called *mnavu*, can be found throughout East Africa. There are several species with black berries, but the most popular are those with orange berries belonging to *Solanum villosum*. This group of species is often erroneously referred to as *Solanum nigrum*, a poisonous plant from Europe that is not usually grown in Africa. African nightshades can grow on a wide range of soil types but do not tolerate drought.

Seeds and Sowing

The soil in the nursery should be loosened and enriched with decomposed manure. Seeds should be mixed with sand and/or ash for uniform sowing. Sow the mixture thinly, either by broadcasting or in rows, 15-20 cm apart and cover with a fine layer of soil. After sowing, the bed should be mulched with tall grass or a similar material to retain moisture. This mulch can be removed once the plants are 3 cm. Transplant when seedlings have 6 true leaves and are 10-15 cm tall. The spacing should be 20 cm in the row by 40 cm between the rows.

Crop Management

Nightshades require large amounts of nutrients, and therefore do well in soils that are rich in organic matter. They also grow well on land covered with ash from recently burned vegetation. Farmers generally use 20-10-10 NPK, urea, or sulphate of ammonia when there is no manure available. Sidedressing is practiced after every second harvest. However, excessive applications of nitrogen can lead to foliar diseases as well as a build-up of nitrates, which could become a human health risk.

Frequent irrigation is needed for good yields. Aphids are a major pest, causing leaves to curl and become unattractive to customers. Diseases are similar to



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those of potatoes and tomatoes, thus rotating with other crops like amaranth is essential. In areas with a high humidity, wider plant spacing should be used.

Harvesting and Postharvest

The first harvest will be 5 weeks after transplanting. The stems can be cut about 10 cm from the ground, so that new side shoots develop. Pickings at roughly 7-14 day intervals will allow 3-4 harvests per plant (more if plants are sidedressed). If complete harvesting is practiced, spacing can be as close as 10x10 cm and plants are uprooted. This method is mainly used when there is less than 2 months before the main staple-food crop will be planted. Roots of these crops can be kept in water to keep the plants fresh.

Picking should be done very early in the morning and the produce sold the same day. Alternatively, the crop can be harvested late in the afternoon and placed on plastic sheets or banana leaves. These should be tied in small bundles. The flowers should be removed before the crop is taken to market. Water these bundles sparingly to retain freshness.

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