

A FIREBRAND VISIONARY FOR WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

Agricultural technicians have well-rounded skill sets that include a knowledge of farming operations, the ability to maintain industry equipment and an awareness of various farming procedures. Taking care of important functions such as maintenance and safety, they add value towards improving overall farming productivity. Introducing Sirkka Kanalelo, an Agricultural Technician employed by Avagro, a commercial horticulture entity based at Farm Shalom, on the banks of the Swakop River. This is her story.

GREEN FINGERS

Born in Windhoek, Sirkka Kanalelo grew up at Oshipumbu-Shomugongo outside Oshakati in Oshana. A proud product of Ongwediva's Mweshipandeka Senior Secondary School, Sirkka's interest in gardening started at a very young age. "Most definitely, I got my green fingers from my aunt. She had a passion for gardening and our entire backyard was covered in sweet potato, sugar cane, carrots, spinach and a few fruit trees", she recalls. Working in the home garden instilled in Sirkka an appreciation for tilling and cultivation. "Each day after school and homework, we got busy. Weeding, watering, pruning, fertilising, harvesting – all these skills we were taught from an early age. How to take care of the land and how to groom plants", Sirkka notes.

"Not only was my aunt's garden her pride and joy. We too enjoyed the compliments we would get from neighbours and visitors, and my aunt was always eager to share advice and give guidance. But more importantly, our garden's produce also helped to support us as a family, because we would sell our surplus to neighbours and friends, or on the informal market", she adds.

HOME GARDENER

The value their home garden added to her family's upkeep played a big role in Sirkka's career decision. Upon completing high school, her results secured her entry to the University of Namibia, where she enrolled for a degree course in Environmental Sciences.

"This is something that struck me at a very young age. Because, I kept on wondering about the impact of other families replicating our home garden model. I thought that if we can do this on a larger scale, then we all can boost our home incomes and become more self-sufficient. And this is what I kept on telling myself, I was going to do one day. I knew already then that I was going to end up in the agriculture sector", Sirkka explains. This dream gained further traction when at high school, Sirkka got introduced to the concept of environmental management.

"I was drawn in by the key notion of sustainability; to use and manage our environmental resources in a responsible way that can ensure that future generations enjoy those resources, as well. There cannot be agriculture without the environment. And this requires all of us to be more accountable to the environment", Sirkka shares. "In fact, whereas before I wanted to become a crop farmer, I now wanted to be able to teach others about viable and responsible crop production methods", she adds.



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Sirkka Kanalelo

Agricultural Technician

TERTIARY STUDIES

With her family's support, Sirkka excelled in her studies at UNAM. "Environmental Science incorporates the study of the physical, chemical and biological processes that take place on the Earth, as well as the social, political and cultural processes which impact the planet. As an Environmental Science student, you strive to understand the complex relationships between mankind and the environment, drawing on a diverse range of disciplines", she explains.

The enthusiasm of her lecturers and being surrounded by like-minded peers who shared her passion for the environment, made it easier for Sirkka to cope with the demands of her programme. "Studying is fun when you actually enjoy the subject matter. Although it involved a lot of reading and laboratory work, my strong passion for agriculture and the environment made it easier to cope. I was like a sponge that simply absorbed all the information", she says.

"Not only did I gain from a well-structured and balanced course, I was also able to acquire other key skills to prepare me for the world of work, including numeracy and data analysis skills, general computer skills, research skills and laboratory and fieldwork skills. I was also taught to present findings clearly and persuasively", she adds.

WORLD OF WORK

Upon obtaining her Bachelor of Science degree - majoring in Crop Production - Sirkka started job hunting. Her go-getter attitude and drive to succeed made it easy for her lecturers to recommend her to the Avagro company. "I will always be indebted to my lecturers for their recommendation. It paved the way for me to enter the sector and to gain first-hand experience at an entity with such a progressive outlook on agricultural production", Sirkka highlights. "Avagro, through our Head Agronomist, Ranjit Patel, has started a high-tech agriculture for women empowerment programme. I'm so fortunate to be part of this initiative. It's rationale is to train mothers, because if we train mothers, the children will also learn. This is something I relate to strongly, considering the way my own aunt introduced me to this world", she adds.

To date, the programme has trained about twelve women in the area of vegetable and flower production. Sirkka assists in this regard and is considered a major asset in Avagro's visionary long term objective to empower Namibians in general, and agriculture graduates specifically, with practical skill sets towards setting up their own agriculture businesses. "This opportunity is doing me a world of good. I learn from seasoned international experts, while honing my own practical skill set", explains Sirkka.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

A key expectation for agriculture technicians in commercial farming settings such as Avagro with its intensive scientific setup, is to evaluate how the environment impacts farming in order to help improve overall operations and productivity. To do this, they conduct experiments, collect and analyse data and

prepare reports based on their findings. Sirkka has taken to this environment like a fish to water. "Division of labour is very important. All our work is broken down into smaller components, where different people get to perform separate tasks. We adhere to strict daily schedules and strict procedures which we follow to the tee. I always walk around the greenhouses with my notepad and pen. Is the temperature at the desired level? Is the top netting intact? Are the side curtains working? It's focused and busy work and you cannot let your guard down", Sirkka notes.

"Greenhouses are warmer than the great outdoors, because all that sunlight coming in through the clear glass or plastic walls turns into heat when it hits a solid surface, such as the ground or the plants inside. Light is really a form of energy, which is why plants can use it to fuel photosynthesis", she explains. "The temperature needs to be at a certain level. If it is around 18 to 19 degrees, then we have to open the top net to allow the plants to get maximum sunlight to support photosynthesis. If the temperature is about 20 to 24 to 29 degrees, that is when you open the side curtains as that give the plants some air circulation", she adds.

HARD LABOUR

Despite being a woman, Sirkka doesn't shy away from the sometimes-hard physical labour in often-inclement weather that comes with her job. On the contrary, when you are as passionate about tilling and cultivation as she is, it makes sense why she often just have to dig her green fingers into Farm Shalom's fertile desert sands. "Agriculture and physical labour go hand in hand. Personally, I have no qualms with putting in the effort and I know that there are many other young women out there that would embrace such an opportunity. We're all different, I guess. For me, there is nothing more fulfilling than putting a seed into the soil, seeing it sprout, nurturing it and to see it grow into a healthy and productive plant in the greenhouse. When that seedling starts to yield, it's even more special", she shares. "That's why the nursery, where we keep our seedlings is my most favourite place. It is the heart of our agricultural operation. If you ensure that all your young seedlings are well taken care of, then you are most likely to flourish", Sirkka adds.

AGRICULTURE ENTREPRENEUR

Experiencing how the agriculture sector continues to gain prominence and how the need for skilled and qualified agriculture technicians continues to grow, Sirkka channels all her time and energy towards supporting her employer's business objectives. "My degree course merely laid the foundation and I have since benefitted immensely from the further onsite practical training I have received. Over the course of three months, they've taken me through so many practical aspects, including nursery preparation, irrigation, intracaltration and harvesting and packaging. I'm very close the full package now", she notes.

Sirkka appreciates that the skills and experience she is picking up along the way stand her in good stead to realise her dream to one day establish and manage her own crop production facility. "I'm confident that I'll

be able to do so. The beginning is always a struggle, because investing in agriculture and infrastructure can be quite expensive. You start small, but still have to spend quite a lot in terms of your initial investment and layout”, she notes. “However, this is my dream and I’m going to make it happen. I’ll start small and with my expertise and hard work, I will make the first greenhouse a success. Then it should be easier to find investors and gear more women to join in building more greenhouses. I’ll then take the model to other regions until I’ve got greenhouses all across the country. It’s going to be a women empowerment through smart agriculture success story”, she shares.

LIFELONG LEARNER

Away from the greenhouses and plantations, Sirkka keeps her circle small and prefer to surround herself with like-minded peers, who are equally as passionate about the agricultural sector. Time is a luxury, anyway; and when not engaging in a good book, Sirkka works on her thesis. “I have ventured into post-graduate studies, which keeps me very busy. The integrated environmental sciences field continues to evolve and it is important for me to keep track with new developments and technologies. There is still so much more I can learn and need to learn”, she explains.

Asked about the focus of her thesis, Sirkka explains that it is important for her to play a part in promoting localized crop production. “We need to move away from the dominant perception that Namibia is too arid and water-scarce to succeed in this regard. Greenhouse can help increase plant growth and fruit production and even allow you to grow plants that wouldn’t normally survive in your climate. We need to embrace these technologies and women can play a special role in harnessing this potential. If women in Zambia, Kenya and Uganda can do it, we can too. Namibian women can run farms as farm managers. We can also do well in this sector”, she concludes.

Sirkka Kanalelo: Far-sighted and driven; focused and passionate. Despite her youth, this visionary woman is destined for greater things in leveraging our country’s agriculture sector and in tapping the potential it holds for community empowerment and food security. Her story teaches us not to waste time chasing success and others; but to appreciate that every flower blooms at a different pace. That as long as you excel at your own passion and perfecting it, you will achieve success - and then - success will come chasing after you. She is living her dream. She is living her passion.

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