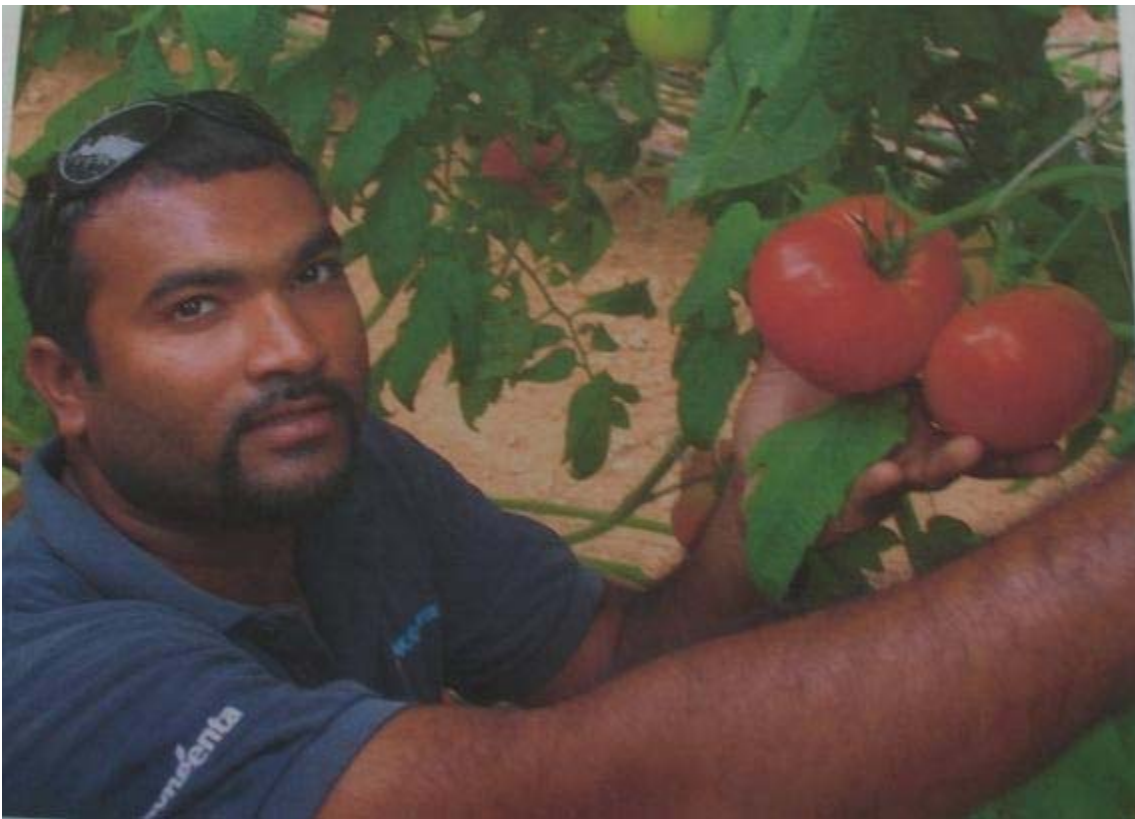


Youth operates profitable tomato greenhouse in St. Bess



Singh & his tomatoes

Hopeton Singh examines tomatoes in his greenhouse in St. Elizabeth

To many people, the profile of a typical Jamaican farmer is of someone over 50 or 60, who is barely making a living, after toiling in the sun and rain for the better part of his life.

“I have broken that mold. At 34, my partners and I are running a first-world greenhouse operation in St. Elizabeth, with 5,400 square feet of land in tomato production.” So says Hopeton Singh.

Mr. Singh acknowledges that farming is in his blood. Having grown up on a farm, at the age of 24 he began planting papaya for the export market; but after six years, due to the increase in hurricane-related activity and the scarcity of arable land near a good water source, he began to look for a more sustainable method of production.

“Traditional farmers”, he says, “have a constant battle with flooding, poor soil, weeds and host of plant pests and diseases.” Based on these challenges he began to do research and to talk to people about other farming methods; and this lead him down the road of protected cultivation using hydroponics, which is the growing of crops without soil, in a nutrient solution of water and fertilizer.

His research showed that this method of production using greenhouse technology, resulted in more rapid plant growth and higher yields, in the absence of soil-borne diseases.

“I had put in my first crop of tomatoes just before Hurricane Ivan. The greenhouse withstood the hurricane and six weeks later, we were the only farm in the area to have tomatoes, and because of that we were able to sell them for \$400.00 per kg.”

Higher yields

Hopeton Sing has nothing but praise for the technology. “Whereas the experts say it guarantees increased growth rates of between 30 and 50 per cent, I recently harvested 16,000 kg (35,000.00 lbs) of tomatoes in a six-month period, which is almost 400 per cent more per square foot, than I would have reaped using open field production.”

Another advantage of hydroponics and greenhouse technology, he says, is the consistency of production it guarantees, which is critical in supplying any market, if you want to keep the contract.

In his own words, “Sustainability is the name of the game.” His advice to farmers is this: “If you remain stuck in the past, you will dig yourselves deeper and deeper into poverty and stagnation. We must adopt the new technologies if our sector is to progress.”

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