



CHEERFUL PACKAGING: Some of the essential oils that can be found and purchased on the Qobo Qobo Essential Oils website. Picture: MADELINE CHAPUT

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Sweet smell of success for Qobo Qobo

Rural farmers achieving promising results in essential oils industry



WHERE IT STARTS: A view of one of the Qobo Qobo Essential Oils nurseries where trials of essential oils begin. Pictures: MADELINE CHAPUT



LOOKING GOOD: Keiskammahoe vegetable and essential oils farmer Sifundo Sebetha checks on his rosemary crops.

MADELINE CHAPUT

Do you have an essential oil diffuser in your home? Use lavender oil to help you sleep at night? Had an aromatherapy massage?

Used for skincare, aromatherapy and alternative healing practices, essential oils are becoming increasingly popular worldwide.

According to market and consumer data company Statista, the global demand for essential oils is expected to reach 404.2 kilotons by 2025 — a dramatic increase from just 226.9 kilotons in 2018.

It is for this reason — and many others — that Qobo Qobo Oils exists.

Situated in the Keiskammahoe valley, the small-scale indigenous oils programme was established in 2014 by the Siyakhokwa development foundation.

“There’s good land with great access to water and it made sense to use the resources that we had at our disposal.

“Cows also don’t like essential oils, which makes it easy to grow and maintain, and very safe from being stolen, as compared to vegetables that are grown in the area,” said Tafara Shuro, who joined the group 10 years ago and has since taken over the running of Qobo Qobo Oils.

Essential oils, he said, had three main uses — cosmetics, aromatherapy and some had medicinal properties.

“There is an international, regional and local appeal for the products. That is what makes essential oils very attractive. The biggest market is international, but it appeals to a lot of people.

“There are also a lot of farmers already growing vegetables like cabbage and because they tend to grow at the same time, it makes it easy for farmers in the same area to flood the market. “Qobo Qobo needed to do something else that wouldn’t create competition with others; something that wasn’t being done.”

Run in partnership with the SA Breweries Foundation and other corporates such as Old Mutual and Nedbank, Qobo



MANY BENEFITS: Some of the dried rosemary that is produced through Qobo Qobo Essential Oils.

Qobo operates as a social enterprise rather than purely a commercial business. Farmers from the community are chosen after a screening process and are then trained and assisted in starting up their essential oil crops.

The farmers go through an intensive training and mentoring process that ensures the transfer of relevant technical skills and knowledge. It includes practical demonstrations of agricultural process and incorporating formal training such as bookkeeping and basic management principles. “The project considers the farmers its key stakeholders and the selection process ensures the best farmers with potential are being incubated and supported.

“Part of why we exist is to help people; to create business and employment; to be the con-

duit through which farmers can access training and the market. We help with the set-up and land,” Shuro, who is also the director of the SA Oil Growers Association, said.

He said in the first four years of the programme, 50 jobs were created each year because the project was still in the set-up phase.

Now there are 20 permanent jobs and 32 part-time jobs.

Some farmers chosen to take part in the programme have their own land while others rent land. Eight local farmers are also involved in the programme with 5ha of land each.

“Our total production is 60ha with plans to develop an additional 20ha in 2023,” Shuro said. “We assist with the first crop, bush clearing, reaping and mulching, as well as setting up the irrigation system.



NEW OPPORTUNITIES: A view of the Qobo Qobo Oils Nursery in Keiskammahoe.

“The farmers get the plants from a mother block from our nursery at the hub in Keiskammahoe to plant in their fields, but the farmers then take over after that.

“It’s their land and it’s their responsibility to maintain, fertilise and make sure the fields remain irrigated.

“When they harvest, they then sell the biomass to us. We process it at our plant in Keiskammahoe and produce the oil, as well as dried rosemary, which is very popular in the spice market,” Shuro said.

The project recently purchased industrial drying fans because the dried rosemary had become a big focus of the business, he said.

“We are supplying a client in India and are in conversation with a client from the Netherlands, who is interested in buying dried rosemary from us.

“We produce one of the most beautiful rosemary oils in SA and we now have 1.8 tonnes of oil in stock.”

Shuro said 1kg of biomass could produce up to 120 small 10ml bottles of oil, which provided a great opportunity for

small businesses interested in buying and decanting for resale.

“It’s an expensive set-up; just the distillation plant [costs] millions. We are grateful for our partners that have enabled us to set up this growing hub,” Shuro said.

Though there are more than 300 types of plants capable of producing essential oils, another challenge is that only certain plants do well in the Eastern Cape climate.

The trick, Shuro said, was to know what worked and grew well in the area. “I’ve been in the essential oils industry for six years, but every now and then I still hear of an oil I never knew existed.

“Here we have rosemary growing like a bomb. We can also grow Cape chamomile, which is still in the trial phase in the fields; thyme and lavender are also now being trialled.

“If Cape chamomile grows well and we can produce enough oil to make commercial sense, then we will expand on that and plant more crops,” Shuro said.

The trial process begins at the

Qobo Qobo Essential Oils nursery in Keiskammahoe, where the group tests whether a particular essential oil can be produced and survive in the climate.

Once this is established, the plants are taken to the fields to trial how quickly they can be harvested.

He said the project now supplied oils to a variety of wholesalers, including Essentia, as well as Herbs-Aplenty and Northern Foods, which are supplied with Qobo Qobo’s dried rosemary.

“Dried rosemary is more popular than rosemary essential oil, because there is an active ingredient called carnosic acid in dried rosemary which makes it useful as a food preservative.

“It can be used in spices as well.” The tough part is renovating Qobo Qobo’s warehouse so it is well ventilated, allowing the rosemary to dry more effectively and quickly.

For Shuro this is the next step in ensuring the business succeeds.

“It’s important to diversify, and have both the dried rose-

mary and the essential oils going, so we have two markets we are supplying to,” he said.

“We believe we should be sustainable in the next three years as we are producing high-value, quality essential oils and herbs.”

Keiskammahoe vegetable and essential oils farmer Sifundo Sebetha said Qobo Qobo’s involvement had made a big difference to his business.

“This means a lot to me. I’m a vegetable farmer in this area, but I started with the essential oils with Qobo Qobo in 2019.

“It is benefiting me a lot in the sense that I’m not doing it alone and only out of my pocket. We are helped by funders a lot,” Sebetha, 47, who shares 10ha of land with another farmer, said.

Farming is Sebetha’s passion and the pristine state of his rosemary crops is a clear indication of this.

“I really enjoy farming. Farming is like raising a baby. Every moment you want to see it [the fields or crops] still living and breathing. These fields are like my babies,” he said.

“I’m proud to be one of SA’s vegetable and essential oil farm-

ers. I’m contributing to our economy and to food production, and that makes me happy.”

He said though his rosemary crops were doing well, getting his produce into the bigger markets was challenging.

“Our challenge is the import market,” Shuro said.

“Here we have a minimum wage, which means we often can’t compete with international prices and are therefore overlooked.

“Meeting some international market requirements is also difficult and there are certain tests and certificates we need, which take time and make the process complicated.”

He said, however, that the hub had funders who assisted in ensuring the programme was sustainable.

“For now our profit margins are very tight, but we want to be sustainable.

“In the next two or three years we hope to get to a stage where we’re self-sufficient, and our own production can sustain us and make a profit.

“As an NGO, the goal is to see the hub take care of itself and not rely on funders as much.”

He said in this regard, every sale — whether bulk essential oil and dried rosemary sales or single sales of the variety of essential oils Qobo Qobo produced and/or packaged — helped to bring them closer to that goal.

Though Qobo Qobo Essential Oils supplies bulk essential oils and herbs to businesses, it also caters for consumers who may be interested in smaller quantities.

Its website boasts a variety of essential oils, including rose geranium, rosemary, lemon oil, peppermint, thyme and Cape chamomile, which are available in 10ml bottles.

The packaging is as bright, fun and colourful as Qobo Qobo’s oils are fragrant.

“Every sale creates more funding for us to buy back biomass from the farmers, to keep things running and to cover our overheads,” Shuro said.

For more about Qobo Qobo Essential Oils, visit www.qobooils.co.za