



HandPicked

HandPicked for green growth

Mr Price Foundation's flagship agriskills programme is tapping into hydroponic tunnel farming to create sustainable income opportunities and improved food production.

Mr Price Foundation's HandPicked programme is bursting with growth potential. An agricultural skills development programme, HandPicked was launched in late 2020 to cultivate entrepreneurial opportunities for youth in agriculture.

The programme selects candidates with a flair for farming and entrepreneurship for a 12-month skills development programme. Growers are sourced from agricultural tertiary institutions and community engagements. They are empowered with technical farming skills, business skills and life skills, as well as practical experience in hydroponic greenhouse production.

The programme addresses a range of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and SA's National Development Plan goals relating to training, decent work and economic growth, food security, health and wellbeing.

Post-training, growers can generate sustainable income through agriculture and agroprocessing, shifting from subsistence farmers to commercial farmers; turning food consumers into food producers; and creating long-term solutions in marginalised communities.



HandPicked is implemented by Fresh Life Produce using the African Grower technology. This Africanised sustainable growing technology features space-saving vertical stacks of growing pods, with coconut coir as the water-wise growing medium. In this system, crops are produced with shorter lead times using fewer scarce resources than traditional field farming.

2023 Financial Year:



03

Agribusinesses established



27

Home growers upskilled



01

Ton of fresh produce harvested



06

Growing hubs (1 CityFarms site)

In proud partnership with:



Next level veggie growing and upskilling HandPicked urban farm



Vertical hydroponics in tunnels on the rooftop of the Kenilworth shopping centre, Cape Town.

With soaring food prices and malnutrition tragically a reality in too many South African communities, the growing of vegetables and fruits can be a lifeline or the start of a thriving business.

It is alarming that one third of children in South Africa suffer from malnutrition, due to poor access to nutritious food. According to data from the Department of Health, over 15,000 cases of severe acute malnutrition required hospitalisation during the 2022/23 financial year.

A thriving vegetable patch can be the start of a business at home, and offers good opportunities to young South Africans, who are increasingly entrepreneurial in their outlook.

Whether an arable area is many hectares or a tiny greenhouse the size of a door, the beauty of vegetables as a crop is that growers can start small, reap rewards relatively fast and ramp up again. Whether it be the supply of spinach to five-star hotels in the city or bok choy sold from the roadside in the suburbs, small growers' produce is always in demand.

Happily, the big retail players in South Africa have galvanised urban farming and food garden projects in new ways in recent years by supporting many innovative and empowering initiatives.

Mr Price Foundation's HandPicked programme is a relevant initiative that has, since 2020, helped develop agriskills in urban and rural settings. This is the first time Mr Price Foundation has invested in the development of agriskills.

Mr Price Group is the primary funder of the Foundation, with partners such as Veldskoen and CHEP coming aboard the HandPicked programme too. The young South Africans who benefit from the

HandPicked skills development programme are equipped to start their own businesses, pursue career opportunities in agriculture or business and/or become food producers in their communities.

Food security & entrepreneurship

David Churchman, head of finance at Mr Price Foundation, comments: "The aim of HandPicked is entrepreneurship: creating economic opportunities for youth and communities through agriculture, using The African Grower technology. A by-product of the initiative is food security as participants can utilise

any crop surplus for their own consumption."

To date, HandPicked has assisted 27 home growers in various provinces to complete training, six growing hubs have been set up as well as three agribusinesses.

An inspiring growing hub launched last year is HandPicked CityFarms Kenilworth Centre in Cape Town. This flourishing urban farm is situated on the rooftop of the Kenilworth Shopping Centre, and it is an impressive development.

A SABI magazine team visited the HandPicked agrihub in the Mother City recently.

This farm has a panoramic view of Table Mountain and encompasses 192 square metres composed mainly of tunnels. The tunnels are secured with 200 litre steel drums, which are great anchors when the Cape Doctor blows.

Louis-Gillis Janse van Rensburg, CEO of Fresh Life Produce, is implementing Mr Price Foundation's HandPicked programme. Louis is clearly passionate about boosting food security and the potential of urban farms in cities.

Louis is an energetic social and agricultural entrepreneur who with his father Rensie designed the African Grower vertical hydroponic system

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Thumbs up for agriskills....Michael Lee, Akhona Gxuluwe and Louis-Gillis Janse van Rensburg

as a method for assisting with the growth of healthy crops to promote food security.

The African Grower vertical hydroponic system is well suited for urban farms. There are more than 1500 of these vertical growing towers in projects in South Africa and Lesotho.

The African Grower consists of:

- Four pots and four pipes made from recycled plastic.
- The pipes slide through the pots, and the combination of the pots and pipes click into a "tower".
- A suspension rope can be run down the centre of the pipes to hang the tower from any suitable overhead fitting or can be incorporated into a framework on the ground.
- Coconut coir is placed in the pots with fertiliser pellets.
- Seedlings or seeds can be planted into the pots.

Louis says their African Grower system was designed to offer an efficient growing system, suited to local conditions when developing city farms or community growing projects. "While there are a lot of sophisticated hydroponic systems available, we developed The African Grower for operability in all conditions. For instance, our system doesn't need electricity necessarily. The pots can be irrigated with manual watering or via an automated system."

Efficiencies

The vertical system's design optimises space and growth of vegetables. Efficiency is achieved in water use, the farmers report, with the tomatoes, for instance, receiving 250ml per day. In comparison,



Farm manager Akhona Gxuluwe in the Insta and floral tunnel



The young learner growers wash and package the daily harvest



Circular economy... waste is recycled by an earthworm farm

tomatoes growing in soil need 3.8 litres of water a day. Watering of the African Grower vertical system can be manual or with an automated irrigation system.

The rooftop city farm uses 348 litres of water per irrigation session a day, which is 62ml per plant per day in winter. In the hot Cape summers, 696 litres of water per day are used, equal to 124ml per plant per day.

The agrihub uses an automated micro system from Netafim, says Farm Manager Akhona Gxuluwe, using municipal water and some rainwater from their tanks. They are promoting the methodology of the circular economy on the farm with waste being reprocessed in an on-site earthworm farm.

The soil-less medium of growth is coconut coir which

helps water use efficiency and retention. Fertiliser is included in the starter kit; it is a controlled release fertiliser from Haifa. A foliar feed is also given to the plants once a week.

Akhona says city farms are a wonderful way to produce nourishing foods in the city close to people and markets. Akhona is an agricultural graduate who grew up in a farming family, and she thoroughly enjoys being a rooftop farming manager. Akhona observes that farming is a good career choice.

"It's a misnomer that farm managers are all males – farming is for everyone. It is not only a male domain as some people believe. I always wanted to be in farming

or horticulture, and am delighted to be managing this farm," says Akhona.

"I would encourage young people whether you live in the city or in the countryside to consider agriculture as a future option as a career or business opportunity."

This agrihub operates as a hands-on training environment, and upskills two unemployed young people from the nearby Langa community as growers every month. They gain practical hands-on experience, and post-training they receive a mini household growing tunnel, empowering them to tap into agroprocessing and promoting household income and food security

Instagrammable

Reflecting a truly modern farm, one of the tunnels is dubbed an Insta tunnel – the HandPicked CityFarms Kenilworth Centre welcomes tour groups and striking a pose in the Insta tunnel with its beautiful blooms is a sought-after place to be.

Since establishment a year ago, the city farm has harvested 685.4kg of produce, including tomatoes, peppers, brinjals, lettuce, rocket, spinach and a variety of herbs.

Akhona says they supply veggies to the restaurants in the centre, including the Mugg & Bean and Ocean Basket. A benefit of this city farm is that from Farm to Fork is just a matter of metres!

The team hope to replicate the HandPicked CityFarms Kenilworth Centre – thought to be the first urban retail rooftop farm in the Western Cape – in other communities.

<https://mrpricefoundation.org>

