

Sorghum making a rebound in Europe thanks to climate change

June 5 2019, by Isabel Malsang



Dry conditions in the Mutoko region of Zimbabwe are fine for sorghum, and climate change has farmers in Europe taking a fresh look at the grain as well

Ferenc Kardos planted 300 hectares of sorghum instead of corn this year. From the fertile Hungarian plain where he lives all the way to

southeastern France, the hot weather cereal is taking root in Europe.

"With [corn](#), we suffered losses three out of five years due to drought," said Kardos, the crop manager of a 3,000-hectare (30-square kilometre) farm without irrigation in southern Hungary, part of the Carpathian Basin which is increasingly exposed to extreme temperatures, pushing farmers to adapt [crops](#) to global warming.

"If we have to lose money, best take a chance with something we don't know well and see what happens," he told AFP. "We know the risks with corn now."

Sorghum, which is in the same family as millet, is the world's fifth-most important cereal crop, after corn, rice, wheat and barley.

Domesticated in the Sahel region of Africa, the grain consumes 30 percent less water than corn and withstands drought better.

Moreover, sorghum needs little in the way of fertiliser as its deep, extensive roots are good at fixing nitrogen present in the soil. And the plants produce grains even in high temperatures.

While sorghum isn't unknown in Europe, where it has been cultivated since just after WWII, it has been grown almost exclusively as fodder for animals.

In Africa and other regions, however, it is an important human food crop, according to the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization.

In Africa, Nigeria and Sudan are the main producers of the grain. EU countries produce only 750,000 tonnes per year, while 60 million tonnes are harvested each year worldwide.



Sorghum is also good for crop rotation because it can help sustain and replenish soil worn out by intensive production of corn, sunflowers or colza

Lack of seeds

During the past several years "there has been an increasing trend for sorghum in Europe", reversing a decline that began in the late 1980s and was reinforced by the reform of the EU's agricultural subsidy system, which provided little support for the grain, said Charles-Antoine Courtois of Sorghum ID, a European association that promotes the crop.

Since 2017 an EU programme has been encouraging sorghum production.

Farmers are also attracted to raising sorghum for crop rotation as it can help replenish soil worn out by intensive production of corn, sunflowers or colza.

"We could have increased surfaces under cultivation even more... but there is a widespread lack of seeds," said Courtois, who also belongs to an association of French producers of sorghum and corn seeds.

After a poor corn harvest two years ago in Hungary there was a spike in interest in sorghum among farmers to avoid putting "all of your eggs in the same basket," he said.

Cultivation of sorghum in Hungary had fallen to 10,000 hectares, from 200,000 hectares three decades ago, according to Ferenc Farkas, who heads up the French farming cooperative Euralis in the country.

Its French rival Axereal, which has malting plants in Croatia and Hungary, is opening a unit to collect sorghum using a silo along the Danube.

Sorghum is also grown in Bulgaria and Italy.

In France, [sorghum](#) is mostly grown in the southwest, but it can be found as far north as the Vosges mountains in the northeast where farmers have had difficulty growing enough animal fodder.

Even with its small production of 326,000 tonnes in 2018, France was one of the top EU producers along with Italy.

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