

■ OPINION

HERITAGE DAY

JOHN STEENHUISEN: Farming is our heritage and our future

Encouraging the wider cultivation of indigenous crops is one way SA is re-imagining its agricultural heritage

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by JOHN STEENHUISEN



Heritage is alive in our fields: SA's agricultural traditions, passed from one generation to the next, sustain communities, preserve culture, and shape a resilient future. Picture: 123RF

A few weeks ago I visited a group of women farmers in the Free State. Their resilience was remarkable, but what struck me most was how they described farming not only as a means to earn a living, but as an inheritance.

For them the land, the skills and the traditions tied to agriculture were something to be safeguarded and passed on, a reminder that heritage is not just what we preserve in monuments, but also the practices that sustain families and communities across generations.

That perspective matters as we mark Heritage Day. Too often we confine “heritage” to monuments or archives. But it is also alive in the soil we till, the foods we share and the traditions farmers carry

forward. Agriculture embodies heritage in a way few sectors can; it is not only part of our past, but also a vital part of our future.

Pride and challenges in SA agriculture

SA's agricultural heritage is both proud and challenging. Proud, because generations of farmers, from smallholders to large exporters, have built a sector that feeds millions and earns international respect. Challenging, because we know there is still work to be done to ensure broader participation, fair access to opportunities and greater inclusivity.

Recognising agriculture as heritage means celebrating resilience while making sure more South Africans, especially women, youth and emerging farmers, can share in its benefits.

Agriculture is also culture in action. Our indigenous crops, namely millet, cowpeas, amadumbe and rooibos are not relics. They are living connections to our identity. Sorghum is more than grain; it is part of ritual and celebration.

Rooibos is more than tea; it is a global symbol of SA's soil and ingenuity. And across provinces elders continue to save seed with care, ensuring biodiversity and memory are not lost. These acts of planting, saving and sharing are as much heritage institutions as any museum or archive.

Indigenous crops and food security

Encouraging the wider cultivation of indigenous crops is one way SA is re-imagining its agricultural heritage. Crops like Bambara groundnuts, cowpeas and African leafy vegetables are adapted to our climate, need less water and often provide richer nutrition than many modern staples. By promoting them we are strengthening food security and building resilience against hunger in an era of climate change. Heritage, in this sense, becomes a living tool for a stronger and more secure future.

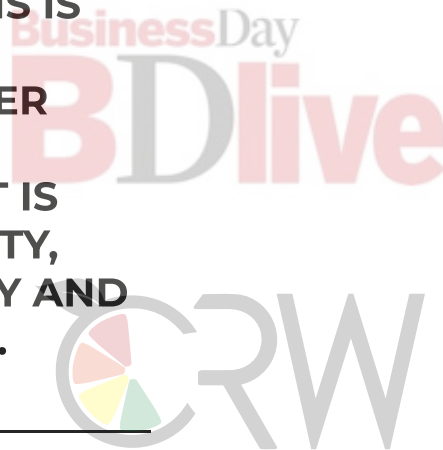
Some still see tradition and technology as opposites. I do not. Drones that monitor crops, satellite data that guides planting, and water-smart irrigation, are not departures from heritage. They are the latest chapter in a story as old as farming itself: people adapting wisely to survive. Just as museums now use digital platforms to reach wider

audiences, our farmers are using digital tools to keep agriculture relevant and resilient.

Passing heritage to the next generation

Heritage is ultimately about transmission — what we pass on to the next generation. In farming, this is more than handing over land or livestock. It is about dignity, opportunity and knowledge. It is about ensuring that young people in rural areas see agriculture not as hardship but as a pathway to innovation and prosperity.

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That is why SA continues to invest in climate-smart practices, extension services and training for young farmers. It is why we work to open new markets for SA produce. Every hectare put under productive use, every new farmer supported, every export protocol secured, all of these add to the agricultural heritage we are shaping for tomorrow.

Our agricultural heritage also reaches far beyond our borders. When a box of citrus lands in Europe, when an avocado shipment arrives in Shanghai, or when a cup of rooibos is brewed in Tokyo, we are exporting more than food. We are exporting heritage: the skill, resilience and ingenuity of SA farmers. That is why our standards in food safety, sustainability and quality must remain world-class,

because this heritage has value not only at home but across the globe.

This Heritage Day, let us broaden our understanding of what heritage means. It is not only in monuments or archives. It is also in the soil, in the seed, in the farmer’s hand and in the shared meal at the family table. Agriculture is our oldest heritage, and re-imagining it for a new era is the surest way of ensuring it also becomes our future.

• *Steenhuisen is agriculture minister.*

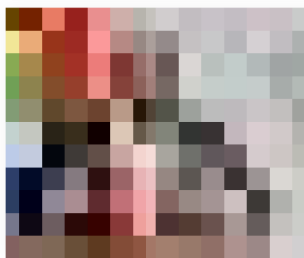
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