Starting a Cassava Farm

Braima James, John Yaninek, Ambe Tumanteh, Norbert Maroya, Alfred Dixon, Rasaq Salawu, Joseph Kwarteng

About this booklet

This booklet is one in a set of field guides prepared by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) to increase the technical knowledge of extension agents and enhance the integration of plant protection and plant production practices in farmers’ efforts to grow a healthy crop of cassava. The booklet is based largely on the extension and farmer training experience of the regional project: “Ecologically Sustainable Cassava Plant Protection” (EScAPP), 1993-1997. EScAPP was executed by IITA’s Plant Health Management Division (PHMD), in collaboration with national agricultural research and extension systems in Bénin, Cameroon, Ghana, and Nigeria, and funded by the Division of Global and Interregional Programmes of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

IITA is one of 16 nonprofit international agricultural research and training centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). Their shared mission is the alleviation of hunger and poverty in tropical developing countries by generating appropriate plant production and protection technologies which benefit the poor and enhance agricultural production while preserving the natural resource base. At IITA, PHMD is dedicated to sustainable plant protection of primary food crops in Africa. The division’s research philosophy is to identify and correct the ecological imbalances in agricultural systems causing pest problems and to provide environmentally and economically appropriate options for integrated pest management (IPM).

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International Institute of Tropical Agriculture
Starting a Cassava Farm

IPM Field Guide for Extension Agents

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What are the objectives of this guide?

This field guide has been prepared to help you to:

* select good sites for cassava farms,
* improve soils for good cassava growth,
* select suitable cassava varieties for planting, and
* select, prepare, and plant healthy cassava stem cuttings.

Introduction

Cassava is one of the most common food crops grown and consumed in many parts of Africa. The crop grows well in various soil types and ecologies. It can be planted alone or in association with many other crops, like maize, groundnuts, vegetables, and rice. Growing cassava is not very labor intensive and usually requires 75–125 person-days per hectare from land preparation to harvesting. The storage roots can be harvested 9–18 months after planting. Under traditional farming practices, one can expect between 8 and 15 tonnes of storage roots per hectare of land planted only with cassava. Even under harsh environmental conditions cassava will provide some food when other crops fail. In most places there is a good market for cassava. The storage roots can be processed into various food products (Figures 1 and 2), and starch for domestic consumption, local, and/or export markets. Cassava leaves are nutritious vegetables (Figure 3). The leaves and storage roots can also be used as animal feed. The stems can be sold as planting material.

In order to grow a healthy crop of cassava you will need to combine plant production and plant protection practices. These include site selection, soil improvement, variety and planting material selection, and planting and post-planting measures against weeds, pests, and diseases. The companion field guides on “Weed Control in Cassava Farms”, “Pest Control in Cassava Farms”, and “Disease Control in Cassava Farms” cover specific details of weeds, pests and diseases.
How do I select a good site for planting cassava?

Cassava grows best in areas with deep and well-drained loamy soils, adequate rainfall, and warm and moist climatic conditions. The factors which guide you to determine if an area will be suitable for growing cassava include vegetation cover, soil texture and fertility, topography of land, and the field history of the area.

Look for an area with thick vegetation cover: Sites with dense vegetation cover are likely to have fertile soils. The dense vegetation shades the soil from direct sunlight, reduces the amount of moisture that is lost from the soil through evaporation, and minimizes run-off water which may otherwise cause soil erosion. The dense vegetation also traps a lot of leaves which rot and add nutrients to the soil. In addition, decaying leaves encourage an increase in the number of earthworms and other small invertebrates in the soil, which in turn help to increase the air in the soil and make it better for growing cassava.

Look for an area with fertile soil: Fertile soils usually have a dark color, for example, dark red or dark brown. The dark color shows that the soil has a lot of organic matter. If the soil looks gray and sometimes contains green or blue spots, it means that there is poor drainage and waterlogging. Do not grow cassava on soils that get waterlogged.

Look for an area with flat or gently sloping land: The best farmland for cassava is flat or gently sloping. Steep slopes are easily eroded and are therefore not very good areas for growing cassava. Valleys and depression areas are also not very suitable because they usually get waterlogged during the dry season.

Look for an area with good soil texture: The best soil for growing cassava is deep, loamy soil. Such soils are rich in nutrients, low in gravel, hold water well, and are easy to work or till. The way to tell if the soil is loamy is to moisten a small amount of it and try to shape it into a ball (Figure 4). If you press the ball and it falls apart, then your soil is loamy. If it feels gritty and you are not able to shape the moistened soil into a ball, then the soil is sandy. If you shape the soil into a ball, and the soil does not fall apart when pressed, then the soil contains a lot of clay and is a clayey soil. Sandy and clayey soils are not the most suitable soils for growing cassava.

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Figure 4: Testing soil texture by the “feel” method

Table 1: Site description and history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site description</th>
<th>Pests, diseases, and weeds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vegetation cover</td>
<td>Cassava pests in the locality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scanty</td>
<td>Cassava green mite</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dense natural fallow</td>
<td>Cassava mealybug</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dense improved fallow</td>
<td>Variegated grasshopper</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Spiraling whitefly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soil texture</td>
<td>Cassava root scale</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>Termites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loamy</td>
<td>White scale insects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clayey</td>
<td>Vertebrates</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other (specify)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soil fertility</td>
<td>Cassava diseases in the locality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Cassava mosaic disease</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Cassava bacterial blight</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cassava anthracnose disease</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cassava bud necrosis</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Root rots</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Leaf spots</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (specify)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topography</td>
<td>Common weeds in the locality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat</td>
<td>Speargrass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilly/steep slopes</td>
<td>Bermuda grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression area</td>
<td>Guinea grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feathery pennisetum</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sedges</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Siam weed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giant sensitive weed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wild poinsettia</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tridax</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goat weed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parasitic weeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (specify)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For site description, tick (+) appropriate boxes. For pests, diseases and weeds, indicate importance of the problem as:

+ = not serious
++ = serious
+++ = very serious
Starting a Cassava Farm

How do I improve the soil for planting cassava?

If you do not select a good site for growing cassava, you may have to spend a lot of time and materials to improve the soil. Cassava plants on good soils grow vigorously and are able to withstand some damage by pests and diseases. The following are examples of cultural practices you can use to improve soil properties.

Manure your farm: At land preparation, you can add organic manure to the soil to increase soil nutrients, improve soil structure, and improve the ability of the soil to hold water. Organic manure can be in the form of green manure or other dead plant or animal manure. In green manuring, plant foliage (fresh leaves and young green stems) is ploughed into the soil. Green manure improves soil properties as the foliage rots. Egusi melon and leguminous crops, for example, groundnuts and beans, make good green manure. Inorganic fertilizers can also be applied to increase soil fertility. For example, in southeast Nigeria, the recommended rate for NPK application is 400 kg per hectare of land.

Prepare suitable seedbeds: Cassava fields on hilly sites with steep slopes are frequently eroded. The erosion will be severe if the leaf canopy of cassava plants is not thick enough to cover the ground against rain splashes. This happens in young cassava farms and if the varieties have a tall and less branching habit (Figure 5). If you cannot avoid growing cassava on steep slopes you can grow cassava varieties with early, low, and much branching habit (Figure 6) to cover the ground quickly and properly against rain erosion. You can also make ridges across the slopes and mulch the ridges to reduce erosion.

Mulch cassava seedbeds: Mulching involves covering the soil surface with plant materials. Mulching improves the fertility of the soil, increases the ability of the soil to hold sufficient water for plant growth, and reduces erosion and weed problems. Mulching cassava seedbeds is especially valuable when growing cassava in dry areas and on slopes.

Mulching requires very large amounts of plant foliage. Dead plant foliage can be used as “dead mulch.” Sources of good dead mulch are foliage from alley crops, leguminous plants, rice husk, coffee hull and general crop and weed residues. Avoid using weed residues containing weed seeds, rhizomes, stolons, or tubers as mulch because these can increase weed problems on your farm. Straws of maize and guinea grass (Figure 7) are bad mulch materials because they take too long to rot and use up soil nitrogen as they do so.

You can grow plants as “live mulches.” For example, egusi melon (a food crop) planted at very close spacing on cassava seedbeds is a good live mulch. Nonfood crops can also be used as live mulches, but these are normally grown as improved fallow plants. For example, during fallow periods you can grow Mucuna pruriens var. utilis on land you have selected for growing cassava in the next season (Figure 8). Mucuna pruriens var. utilis is, however, a fire hazard in the dry season when its foliage dries.

Plant cassava in association with other crops: Appropriate intercrops improve soil properties in a manner similar to live mulches. Crops that are commonly intercropped with cassava are maize, rice, legumes, and vegetables. Legumes, for example, cowpea and groundnuts, are a particularly good intercrop because these plants make and release nutrients into the soil.
How do I select the best cassava varieties to plant?

The best cassava varieties are those that are liked by consumers, grow fast, give good yields, and store well in the soil. They are also tolerant to major pests and diseases. The particular variety chosen by a farmer depends on her/his objectives for planting the crop and the factors looked for in selecting cassava varieties. Usually, the following criteria are considered:

1. **Look for varieties with high dry matter and good food quality:**
   - Storage roots consist mainly of water and dry matter. The dry matter is mainly starch and a little bit of fiber. The percentage of dry matter in the roots determines the sweetness and quality of the products obtained. The roots of varieties that have 30% or more dry matter are said to have high dry matter content. Such varieties produce good quality products and are profitable for growers and market women.

2. **Look for varieties with good mealiness:**
   - Mealiness refers to the cooking ability of cassava storage roots without processing. Mealy varieties are commonly called "sweet" cassava whilst non-mealy varieties are called "bitter" cassava. Bitter cassava requires processing before consumption and this is related to the total cyanide content (referred to as cyanogenic potential, CNP) in the storage roots. Varieties with high CNP are more toxic. Consumers prefer the less toxic varieties as they are safer for consumption.

3. **Look for varieties that bulk early:**
   - Bulking refers to the swelling of the storage roots as they are filled with stored food. Varieties that bulk early are better able to offset losses in storage root yield caused by weed competition, leaf-feeding pests, and disease.

4. **Look for varieties with good ground storability:**
   - Ground storability is the ability of the mature cassava storage roots to stay in the ground for a long time without getting spoilt. Varieties with better ground storability will reduce losses in postharvest storage problems.

5. **Look for varieties that are tolerant to weeds, pests, and diseases:**
   - Some cassava varieties tolerate weeds, pests, and diseases better than others. In selecting a variety to grow, it is advisable to consider varieties that are adapted to the local conditions and have resistance to the major pests and diseases in the area.

### Table 2: Some features of common cassava varieties in West and Central Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variety</th>
<th>Expression of selected features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yield potential</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>IITA</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>TMS 30572</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benin</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>BEN 6052</td>
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<tr>
<td>RB 89509</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cameroon</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8017</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8034</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ghana</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Asiasia&quot;</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Abasa fitaa&quot;</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nigeria</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MS 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>NR 8082</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** IITA, INRAB-Benin, MoFA-CSD Ghana, IRA-D Cameroon, and NRCRI-Nigeria

**CGM** = Cassava green mite
**CMD** = Cassava mosaic disease
**CBB** = Cassava bacterial blight
How do I select healthy cassava stem cuttings?

The most common sources of cassava stem planting material are farmers’ own farms. Occasionally, cassava stem cuttings are sold at village and town markets. Researchers and extension agents sometimes provide their contact farmers with cassava stem cuttings. Many cassava pests and diseases are stem-borne and spread by distribution, sale, and planting of infested or diseased stem cuttings. By planting healthy stem cuttings, you can greatly reduce the spread and damage caused by these cassava pests and diseases. The following guidelines will assist you to avoid unhealthy stem cuttings and to select healthy planting material for a healthy crop of cassava.

Look for healthy cassava plants. Select healthy cassava plants in the farm. Healthy cassava plants have robust stems and branches, lush foliage, and minimal stem and leaf damage by pests and diseases. From each plant select the middle brown-skinned portions of stem as stem cuttings. These parts sprout and ensure plant vigor better than the top green stem portions. Stem cuttings taken from the top green portions of stems or extreme top and bottom of stored stems are unsuitable. They will dehydrate quickly, produce unhealthy sprouts, and are easily damaged by pests and diseases.

Avoid plants with pests and diseases. In selecting cassava plants as sources of stem cuttings, you should avoid those infected with these pests and diseases. The common stem-borne cassava pests and diseases are cassava mealybug, cassava green mite, spiraling whitefly, white scale insect, cassava mosaic disease, cassava bacterial blight, cassava anthracnose disease, and cassava bud necrosis.

The cassava mealybug, Phenacoccus manihoti, occurs on cassava leaves, shoot tips, petioles, and stems. The mealybugs are covered with white waxy secretions. Cassava mealybug damage symptoms include shortened internode lengths, compression of terminal leaves together into “bunchy tops” (Figure 9), distortion of stem portions, defoliation, and “candlestick” appearance of shoot tip. The insects survive on cassava stems and leaves and are easily carried to new fields in this way.

The cassava green mite, Mononychellus tanajoa, occurs on the undersurfaces of young leaves, green stems, and axillary buds of cassava. The mites appear as yellowish green specks to the naked eye. Mites survive on cassava stems and leaves and are easily carried to new fields in this way. Cassava green mite damage symptoms include yellow chlorotic leaf spots (like pin pricks) on the upper leaf surfaces, narrowed and smaller leaves (Figure 10), “candlestick” appearance of the shoot tip, and stunted cassava plants.

The spiraling whitefly, Aleurodicus dispersus, damages cassava by sucking sap from the leaves. Colonies of the insect occur on the undersurfaces of cassava leaves and are covered with white waxy secretions similar to those of the cassava mealybug. Spiraling whitefly eggs occur in spiral patterns of wax tracks, mostly on the undersurfaces of leaves. Symptoms of whitefly damage are black sooty mold on the upper leaf surfaces, petioles, and stems (Figure 11), and premature leaf fall of older leaves. The insects survive on cassava leaves and stems and are easily carried to new fields in this way.
The white scale, Aonidomytilus albus, covers cassava stem surfaces with conspicuous white waxy secretions (Figure 12). The insect sucks sap from the stem and dehydrates it. Stem cuttings derived from affected stem portions normally do not sprout. The insects survive on cassava stems and leaf petioles and are easily carried to new fields in this way.

**Cassava mosaic disease** is caused by a virus which occurs inside cassava stems. Symptoms of cassava mosaic disease damage are patches of normal green leaf color mixed with light green and yellow chlorotic areas in a mosaic pattern (Figure 13). Generally, plants with these symptoms should be avoided as sources of stem planting material. However, the disease is very common in Africa and it is sometimes difficult to find cassava plants that are completely free from the disease. You can, however, reduce cassava mosaic disease problems by selecting stem cuttings from cassava stem branches and not from the main stems. Stem cuttings from the branches are more likely to sprout into disease-free plants than stem cuttings from the main stems.

**Cassava anthracnose disease** is caused by a fungus which occurs on the surface of cassava stems. The disease damage symptoms are cankers ("sores") on the stem and bases of leaf petioles (Figure 15). The disease reduces the sprouting ability of stem cuttings.

**Cassava bud necrosis** is caused by a fungus which grows on the surface of cassava stems covering the axillary buds or the "eyes" of stem cuttings (Figure 16). The affected buds die, and the sprouting ability of stem cuttings is reduced.

**Cassava bacterial blight** is caused by a bacterium which occurs inside cassava stems. The disease damage symptoms are angular leaf spots on the under leaf surfaces, leaf blighting and wilting (Figure 14), gum exudate on the stems, and shoot tip die-back. Avoid selecting stem cuttings from plants with these symptoms.
How do I best plant cassava?

The important factors to consider when planting cassava are time of year, land tillage methods, seedbed type and preparation, and preparation, handling, and planting mode of stem cuttings.

Select suitable planting dates: You should try to plant cassava early at the beginning of the rainy season. This ensures healthy sprouting and good crop establishment which helps the plant to better withstand damage by dry season pests like the cassava green mite, cassava mealybugs, and termites. Late planting at the end of wet season exposes the crop to severe damage by these pests as the dry season progresses. However, planting date recommendations should fit within local farming calendars and farmers' choice of crops to enhance their adoption.

Use suitable land and seedbed preparation methods: In cassava cultivation, land is usually tilled to loosen up the soil, improve soil drainage, make it easy for roots to develop, and promote healthier storage root development. Mounds and ridges are commonly made to gather top soil material for cassava root development, limit prolonged contact between the storage roots and stagnant water, and protect storage roots from rodent and bird pests.

The soil texture at the site you select for cassava cultivation will be an important factor in determining the level of tillage and type of seedbeds required for your cassava farm. In deep loamy soils, tillage may be essential but it does not matter which seedbed type is adopted and cassava can be planted on the flat (Figure 17), mounds (Figure 18), or ridges (Figure 19).

However, if the loamy soil is shallow and cassava is planted on the flat, the storage roots will quickly reach hard ground or rocks giving poor yields. In sandy soils, minimum tillage and planting cassava on the flat are appropriate because the soil is sufficiently loose to allow for faster drainage and normal storage root development. At sites where the sandy soil gets waterlogged, it is however better to make ridges or mounds than to plant on the flat. In clayey and poorly drained soils, tillage and planting of cassava on mounds or ridges are also essential to limit the effects of waterlogging.

Prepare and handle stem cuttings properly: When cutting up cassava stems into stem cuttings for planting, make sure each cutting is at least 20–25 cm long and has about 5–8 nodes. You should handle cuttings carefully during transportation to prevent bruises and damage to the nodes. This can be done by packing them on cushions of dry leaves.

Sometimes, when planting material is slightly infested with cassava green mites, cassava mealybugs, and other stem-borne pests, the stem cuttings can be treated by immersing them in heated water for 5–10 minutes just before planting. This treatment will kill pests on the surface of the cuttings. You can prepare the heated water by mixing equal volumes of boiling and cold water. Alternatively, you can dip the stem cuttings into a dilute pesticide solution (for example, 1% Rogor solution) to kill stem-borne pests. You can also reduce the incidence of cassava anthracnose and other
stem-borne fungal diseases if a solution of pesticide (for example, Décis) and fungicide (for example, Benlate) is used. If pesticides are to be used, you should consult the label for guidelines on their application methods and how to avoid personal and environmental hazards associated with their use.

**Adopt suitable planting mode:** In order to get the best sprouting and growth from cassava stem cuttings, it is important to plant them properly. Cassava stem cuttings may be planted vertically, at an angle, or horizontally. When planted vertically, the storage roots develop deeper in the soil, more closely together, and are more difficult to harvest by pulling. Vertical planting is best in sandy soils. In such soils, plant stem cuttings vertically with 2/3 of the length of the cutting below the soil. When planted horizontally, the storage roots develop more closely to the surface and are more likely to be exposed and attacked by rodent and birds. Also, in horizontal planting several weak stems develop from the stem cutting. Horizontal planting, however, has the advantage of killing insect and mite pests which occur on the surface of stem cuttings. In loamy soil it is probably best to plant at an angle.

The spacing between plants will depend on whether you are growing cassava alone (sole crop) or with other crops (intercropping). If cassava is being grown alone, plant 1 meter apart from each other. If cassava is being grown as an intercrop, consider the branching habit of both the cassava and the other crops and make sure there is enough space for the plants. You should also make sure there is enough space for you to work between the plants during weeding and other activities.

**Summary**

- **To select a good site for a cassava farm,** look for an area with dense vegetation cover, good soil texture, fertile soils, and flat or gently sloping land; also examine the field history to plan for plant protection measures.

- **Improve the soil** by manuring, mulching, and intercropping to encourage cassava plants to grow vigorously and offset damage by cassava diseases.

- **To select good cassava varieties for planting** look for varieties with high dry matter, good mealiness, good ground storability and which are well adapted to your area; the variety should also bulk early and be easy to process.

- **To select healthy cassava stem cuttings,** choose healthy cassava plants as sources of planting materials; use stem cuttings taken from the middle, brown portions of the stem and free of stem-borne pests and diseases.

- **To prepare cassava stem cuttings for planting,** cut each stem cutting to a length of at least 20–25 cm; use stem cuttings with about 5–8 nodes; treat stem cuttings slightly infested with stem-borne pests by immersing them in heated water for 5–10 minutes, dipping them into a dilute pesticide solution, or by planting them horizontally.

- **To plant cassava stem cuttings properly** consider the type of soil; prepare ridges and mounds in areas where soil gets waterlogged; use minimum tillage in sandy soil; plant cassava stem cuttings vertically in sandy soils; plant cassava stem cuttings at an angle in loamy soil; plant cassava stem cuttings 1 meter apart from each other in sole cropping; and in cassava intercrops make sure there is enough space for the plants.
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