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## Kenyan tea growers look to Montana wood burners for innovation

Rob Chaney  
Nov 20, 2016

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Alfred Njagi, general operations manager of the Kenya Tea Development Agency, describes the country's impending shortage of firewood and its impact on tea production. Njagi was part of a trio of Kenyans visiting Montana last week to learn about forestry practices and use of biofuels for energy production in the state.

Kurt Wilson

Rob Chaney

**A**lfred Njagi came all the way from Kenya to Missoula seeking the right kind of firewood for his tea.

That makes more sense when you know these three things: Kenya grows the world's third greatest quantity of tea, after China and India. Montana has done groundbreaking work getting the most energy possible out of wood slash. And it takes a lot of heat to properly dry tea leaves before they go in those little bags.

“Every percent of efficiency we can find is a few more shillings in the farmers' pockets,” the general operations manager of the Kenya Tea Development Agency said during a visit to the University of Montana. “That’s why we’re interested in learning about good sources and proper use of wood slash.”

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Since Kenyans started concentrating on tea cultivation about 50 years ago, the crop now contributes 4 percent of the African nation's gross domestic product. More than 600,000 small-scale farmers pool their production through the Kenya Tea Development Agency. Most of them work on a half-acre or less of ground.

Coincidentally, a growing number of them raise a purple-leaf variety imported by Lake Missoula Tea Co. in Missoula. Store owner Jake Kreilick said the emerging popularity of the tea's antioxidant and other health benefits has made it a game-changer for him.

"This is the first tea we've marketed outside our own region," Kreilick said of the Kenyan purple variety. "It allows a small company like us to think bigger."

Kreilick visited the purple-leaf growing areas of the Nandi Hills in Kenya last summer. He said the variety's vigor in growing on former grazing lands impressed many farmers who had a tough time getting more traditional teas to produce.

The processing factories where tea gets dried can use gas or diesel to run their heaters. But that costs four or five times as much as firewood. On the other hand, only about 6 percent of Kenya has forest, and much of that is protected. Family kitchens burn most of the available kindling for cooking.



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“The tea factories are last in the supply chain,” Njagi said. “So it makes sense to grow our own trees.”

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Lots of effort has gone into developing tree plantations using fast-growing eucalyptus species that reach maturity in about 10 years. Tea farmers have also experimented with sugar cane husks (another major Kenyan crop) and other agricultural waste.

But fuel is just part of the challenge. That’s where the Montana visit comes in.

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**During their stay**, Njagi and Geoffrey Ronoh of Strathmore Energy Research Center in Nairobi visited the electricity-generating wood waste burner at F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Co. in Columbia Falls, the pellet-fuel heating system at Clark Fork Valley Hospital in Plains, Darby School District’s wood-chip heating system and the bioenergy technology engineers in Missoula. They also toured the cordwood heating system at the Treasure State Correctional Center in Deer Lodge and the wood-chip heating system at the University of Montana Western campus in Dillon.

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“We’re looking at both quantity and quality,” said Thomas Buchholz, a senior scientist with Spatial Informatics Group who’s doing biofuel research at the University of Montana. Tea farmers need a dependable supply chain of fuel that will produce affordable heat so they can stay in business.

Managing a wood-burning boiler is more complex than one heated by fuel oil. That means finding the most cost-effective way to use wood without damaging Kenya’s dwindling forest cover.

“Energy is the biggest cost in tea production,” Ronoh said. “And we are running out of wood.”

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### Rob Chaney

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