

Maria's Harvest

A Lesson in Safe Farming





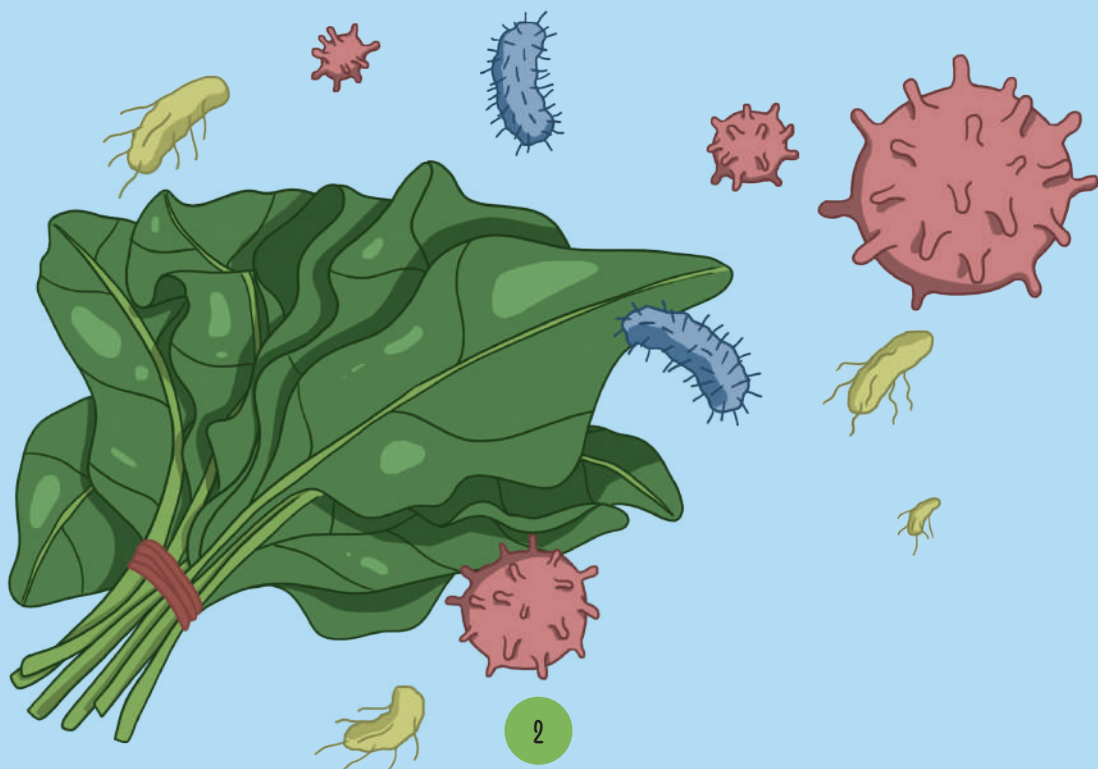
Maria wiped the sweat from her brow as she stood in the middle of her small vegetable farm, the sun blazing overhead. Rows of leafy greens, tomatoes and cucumbers stretched out before her, the fruits of months of hard work.

She'd been farming this patch of land for years, selling her produce at the local market. It wasn't a big operation - just her, her husband Tebogo, and a handful of seasonal workers - but it kept them going.

Lately, though, she'd heard whispers at the market: some buyers were asking where her food came from, how it was grown and whether it was safe. She brushed it off at first. Her vegetables looked fine - bright, fresh and tasty. What more did they need?

One day, everything changed. A neighbour, Patrick, came by in a panic. "Maria, did you hear? They traced a sickness back to some spinach sold at the market. People got ill—really ill. They're saying it was contaminated!" Maria's stomach dropped. She didn't grow spinach, but the thought hit her hard: Could that happen to me? She'd always assumed her produce was safe because it grew from the earth, but Patrick's words stuck with her.

That night, she couldn't sleep. She decided it was time to take food safety seriously - not just for her customers, but for her family's livelihood.

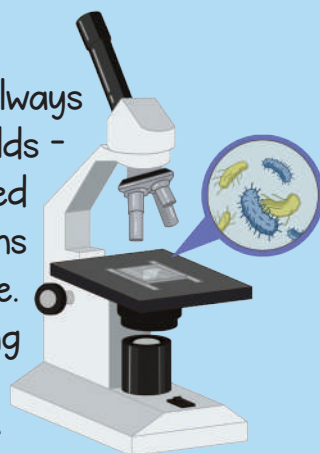


The next morning, Maria visited the local Department of Agriculture's office. A kind officer handed her a guide titled Food Safety for Small-Scale Growers. "This will help you keep your crops safe," he said. "It's not hard - just smart practices."

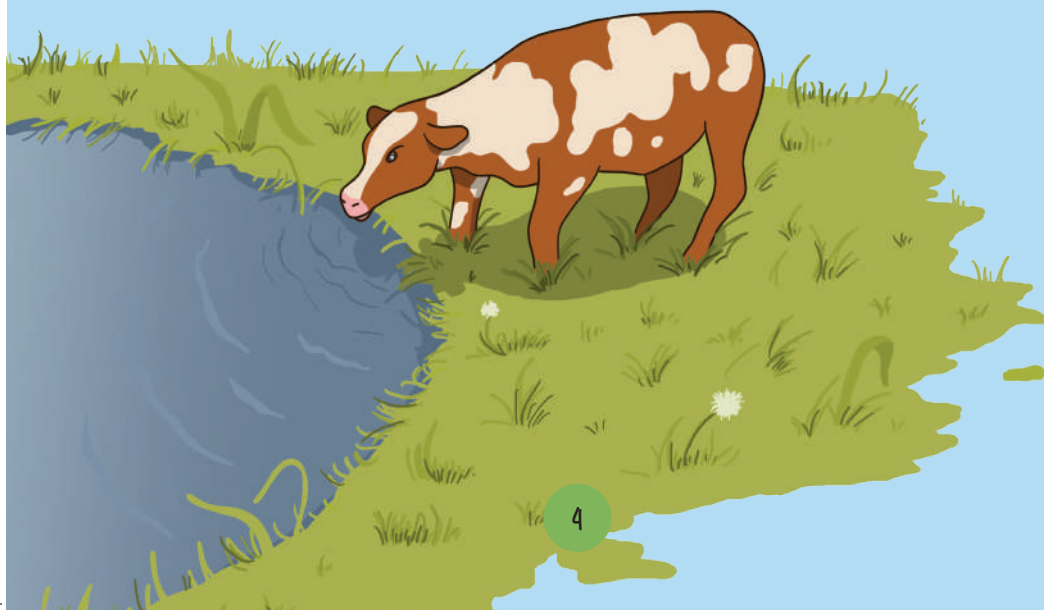
Maria took it home and sat with Tebogo under the shade of a tree, reading it aloud. The guide was full of steps she'd never considered: protecting produce from contamination, keeping records, managing water, and more. It felt overwhelming, but she decided to start small and figure it out step by step.



First, Maria tackled the water. She'd always used the nearby river to irrigate her fields - it was free and easy. But the guide warned that surface water could carry pathogens from animal waste or sewage. She remembered seeing cows wading upstream sometimes and shuddered. "Tebogo," she said, "we need to test our water."



They contacted a laboratory in the city to test their river and borehole water. The river, it turned out, had traces of *E. coli* - a sign of faecal contamination. The borehole water was clean, though, and with yearly tests, they could rely on it. For washing her harvested vegetables, Maria switched to municipal water from a tap they'd installed near the packing shed. It cost a little more, but she wasn't willing to risk anyone's health.



Next, she looked at her soil. Maria had been using raw cow manure from a nearby farm as fertiliser - it was cheap and made her crops thrive. But the guide said untreated manure could harbour pathogens, especially if applied too close to harvest. She switched to composting instead. Tebogo built a simple compost pile with manure, straw and vegetable scraps, turning it regularly to heat it up and kill off microbes. They covered it to keep birds and rodents away.



For her short-season greens, Maria stopped using manure altogether and bought chemical fertiliser from a trusted supplier and followed the instructions carefully for optimal yields and safe crops. She started keeping a notebook, jotting down what she applied, when and where - something the guide called “traceability.”

Before the next planting season, Maria revisited her approach to pest management. In the past, she had occasionally used pesticides from a local shop, selecting products based on word of mouth rather than proper guidance. The food safety guide, however, emphasised the importance of using only registered pesticides and applying them responsibly.

Maria learned to read the labels carefully, checking for expiry dates, dosage instructions and pre-harvest intervals - the time required between spraying and harvesting. She also took the time to attend a community workshop on integrated pest management (IPM), which taught farmers how to minimise chemical use by rotating crops, using pest-resistant varieties, and introducing beneficial insects.



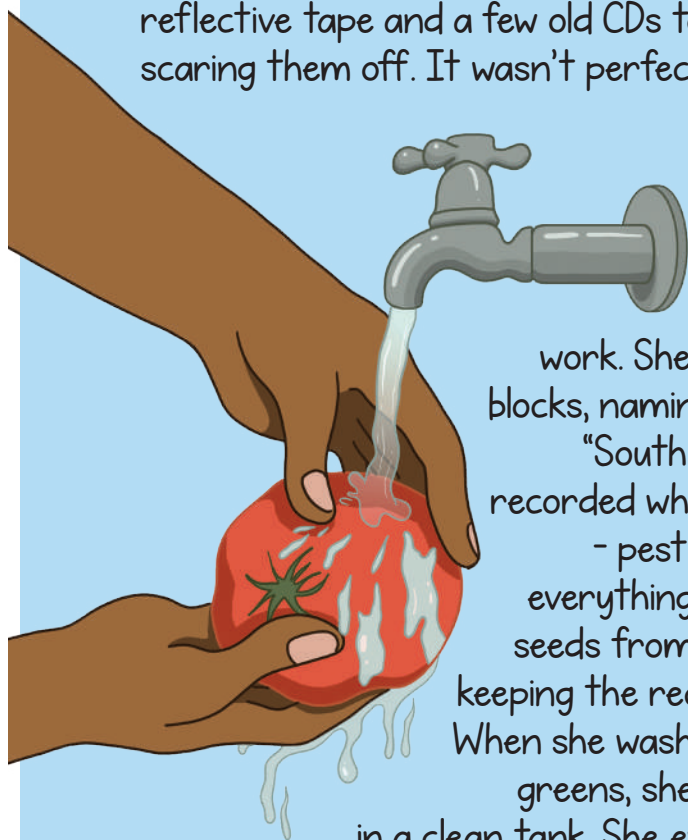
Inspired, she began monitoring her fields more regularly for pest signs, applying pesticides only when absolutely necessary and in the right conditions. She wore gloves and a mask when

spraying, and kept pesticides locked in a dedicated cabinet away from food and water sources. Like with her fertiliser and water use, she documented every application, noting the product name, amount and the exact block treated.

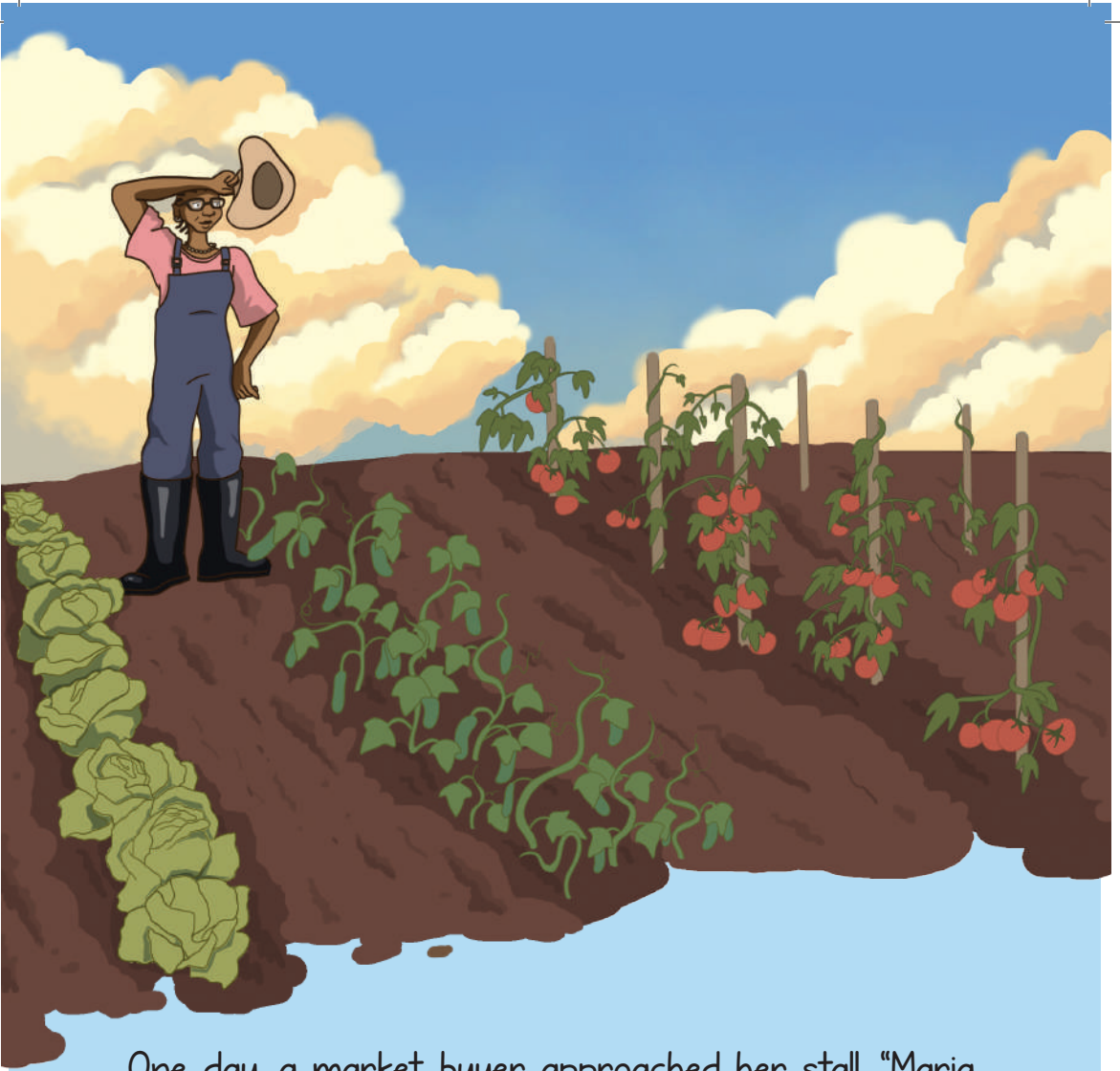


By using pesticides more responsibly, Maria not only protected her customers but also reduced risks to herself, her workers and the environment.

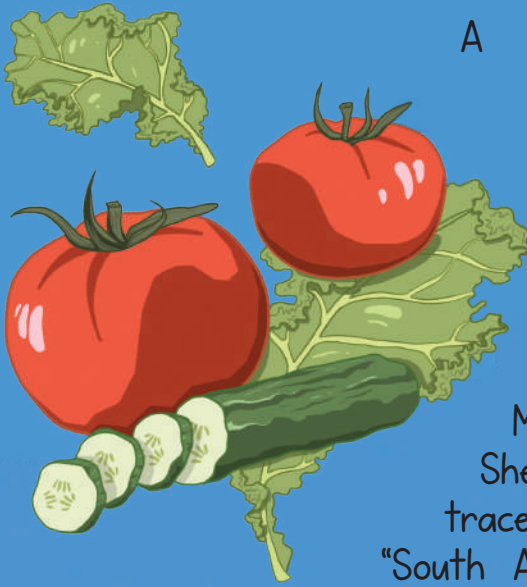
Then came the animals. Maria had always let her dog, Chico, roam the fields, thinking he kept pests away. But the guide warned that pets could spread germs too. She fenced off her growing areas and trained Chico to stay near the house. Wild birds were trickier - some roosted in the trees near her packing shed, dropping feathers and worse onto her crates. Tebogo rigged up reflective tape and a few old CDs to flash in the sunlight, scaring them off. It wasn't perfect, but it helped.



Harvest time rolled around, and Maria put more of the guide's advice to work. She divided her farm into blocks, naming them "North Area," "South Area," and so on, and recorded what she did in each one - pesticide sprays, harvests, everything. She bought certified seeds from a registered supplier, keeping the receipts in her notebook. When she washed her tomatoes and greens, she used municipal water in a clean tank. She even marked her boxes with a code - date and block number - so she'd know exactly where each batch came from.



One day, a market buyer approached her stall. "Maria, I've got a big order, but I need to know your food's safe. Got any proof?" Maria smiled and pulled out her notebook. "Here's where it's grown, how it's handled, even the water tests. I've got records for everything." The buyer nodded, impressed. "You're one of the few who can show me this. I'll take 50 kilos of tomatoes, and I'll be back next week."



A few months later, disaster struck. A customer complained that her cucumbers tasted odd, and rumours of a recall started swirling.

Maria didn't panic. She checked her records, traced the batch to the "South Area," and found the problem: a worker had used untested river water to rinse them that day. She pulled all the affected boxes before anyone got sick, contacted the market, and explained what happened. The buyers appreciated her honesty - and her system. "You caught it fast," one said. "That's why we trust you."

Maria's farm didn't just survive - it grew. Word spread that her produce was safe and reliable, and soon she was selling to bigger markets that required food safety certificates. It wasn't easy changing her ways, but every step - clean water, composting, record-keeping, pest control - paid off.

She'd turned her small farm into a business she could be proud of, one that fed people without making them sick. And every time she walked through her fields, she thought of that guide and smiled. Safe farming wasn't just about rules - it was about trust, health and a future she could count on.





Maria's Harvest

1KG for R19
CARROTS

R21
LETTUCE

R18
CUCUMBER

R25
MANGOS
1KG for R30
APPLES

R34
SPINACH

Maria



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