

2nd Mediterranean Plant Conservation Week

"Conservation of Mediterranean Plant
Diversity: Complementary Approaches
and New Perspectives"

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S3 – Ex situ and in situ plant species conservation: collaborations, strategies, communication

TITLE: Simaseed Project: Protecting Plant Biodiversity in Sicily - Malta Natura 2000 Sites

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ABSTRACT:

SiMaSeed is a transborder project funded under INTERREG V IT-MT with an operational budget of 1.88 million euros and has as its main aim the protection of plant biodiversity in Malta and Sicily Natura 2000 sites. The project forms part of the Programme's Priority Axis III – preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency. Objective 3.1 specifically deals with efforts that contribute towards the arrest of the loss of terrestrial and marine biodiversity in the area, maintain and reactivate the ecosystem and protected areas such as Natura 2000 sites. SiMaSeed has four partners, with the University of Catania (DSBGA - Dipartimento di Scienze Biologiche, Geologiche e Ambientali) as project leader while Argotti Botanic Gardens and Resource Centre (ABGRC) of the University of Malta, the Germplasm Center of Marianelli (DRSRT - Dipartimento Regionale Sviluppo Rurale e Territoriale, Regione Siciliana) and the Ministry of Gozo are partners.

The Mediterranean basin represents a hotspot of biodiversity with many species being lost or on the brink of extinction. The Island of Malta is home to over 1100 vascular plant species, while Sicily has over 3000 vascular plant species, with about 20% being endemic. However, both Islands are presently sharing environmental (fragile habitats and overexploitation of natural resources) and policy concerns arising from inadequate land management practices. The need to find and share common strategies and interventions to arrest the biodiversity loss led to SiMaSeed. It proposes a combined approach of conservation strategies: "ex situ" with renovation and technological upgrading of existing Seed Banks in Sicily and in Malta and the creation of a new Seed Bank in Gozo thus ensuring long-term storage under controlled conditions (based on agreed and shared protocols); and "in situ" with the population reinforcement in pilot sites within habitats of Natura 2000 network. This will contribute to arresting loss of biodiversity and promoting a transborder sustainable development, thus going beyond the limits that the two methods offer if used separately.

The most ambitious part of the SiMaSeed project seeks to carry out scientific studies on how to reduce the loss of important but endangered plant species from selected Natural 2000 sites in Malta and Sicily through in situ conservation. This will help to reinforce plant populations of rare and endangered species by growing plants in nurseries that will then be used for habitat restoration and reinforcement. Two partners are each involved in the production of 20,000 plants that will be planted out in Natura 2000 sites in Malta and Sicily as part of reinforcement and site rehabilitation efforts. This will help to bridge the gap between ex situ and in situ conservation strategies. The project will also assist in cooperation with other entities both in Malta and Sicily to improve scientific understanding and promote greater awareness and education on the use of native plants in habitat restoration, landscaping and nursery practice.