

Meeting up with Zoe Katsamani, a woman champion of farming with Nature on the Island of Crete, Greece

The testimonial video clip of Zoe Katsamani, an olive grower and a woman champion of farming with Nature on the Island of Crete, Greece can be accessed through [this link](#). Indeed, Zoe proved herself to be a woman champion on the use of several of the Nature-based Solutions that are being promoted through the PRIMA funded Mara-Mediterra project.

Dirk De Ketelaere and Anna Spiteri (IRMCo, Malta) first met up with Zoe Katsamani at the School of Agricultural Sciences on the Island of Crete. The latter is the only University School of Agriculture on the Island. Its goal is to act as a reference point for bodies from the Region of Crete who require expertise regarding any topic within the scope of Agricultural Science and Agri-food. We met up with the principal and several of the school's teaching and research staff. Its Vocational Training Centre was established in 2019, offering 2-year programmes on respectively, 'Horticultural Crops' and 'Greenhouse Crops'.



We are invited to a visit of the School's Laboratory of Crop Production & Propagation Material and in the School's Centre for Lifelong Learning we meet up with one of the students. The middle-aged woman by the name of Zoe, laments about the low number of students attending the courses. Zoe invites us to witness first-hand how she has been successfully applying the agro-ecological practices she learnt about.

We find out that when Zoe prematurely lost her husband and father of her two children, she decided to leave her employment in Heraklion, the capital city of Crete, and return to the farm where she grew up as a child. She cultivates around 2000 olive trees, which her father obtained 40 years ago, though these are scattered over many small to medium-sized plots of land. After explaining to her that in the framework of the PRIMA funded Mara-Mediterra project, farmers' testimonials on the benefits of their use of agro-ecological practices have been filmed in Tuscany (Italy), Lesvos (Greece) and Malta, Zoe agrees for us to film her use of agro-ecological practices, which she started introducing three years earlier.

In the testimonial video clip, Zoe explains about her use of both live and dead mulching. She points to the wheat that is growing in one of her fields and where she plans to cultivate melons in the spring. She proudly adds that in adopting this practice, she gets three cash crops from this field in the same year: wheat, melons and olives. We move on to another field where she points to a multitude of pruned branches from the olive trees. She explains that these will be passed through a shredder to produce mulch that will remain on the ground as a means to conserve soil moisture and suppress the growing of weeds. Moreover, she is also clearly well aware that organic mulch gradually decomposes over time, adding nutrients and organic matter to the soil.



Zoe is concerned about her dwindling access to fresh water resources. Although she has a pump to draw groundwater, groundwater levels fell drastically in recent years. Before, she was pumping the groundwater at 160 m below the ground, with the sea level being 40 m lower (at 200 m below the ground level). New boreholes in the area are being drilled to a depth of 350 m.



To augment supplies, she undertook to build a reservoir which collects the rainfall. However, she realizes that the high evaporation rates during the hot summer months present a further challenge. As a remedy she is planning to fill the reservoir with floating objects, and laughs when she adds these will be of different colours.

It is late afternoon by the time we reach back from visiting several of her fields to her farmhouse, and we have a long drive back to Rethymno. But Zoe decides we should have dinner first and promptly invites us to join her and her family in a not-so-nearby taverna. Zoe chuckles when she recalls how, at first, her neighbour farmers were highly sceptical about her use of agro-ecological practices, whereas - today - they are seeking her advice on how to apply these practices correctly for themselves! We share anecdotes of our visit to Crete with her and her family over yet another Cretan feast.



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