

Greeks mobilise to protect endangered seeds

May 15 2011, by Eleni Colliopoulou

The remote valley of Mesohori in northeastern Greece seems an unusual choice for a stand against genetically modified crop conglomerates who are knocking on Europe's door.

Yet thousands of [organic farming](#) advocates seeking to bar so-called "Frankenstein" foods from the continent made the journey here to help raise awareness about dangers to seed diversity.

The event was an annual seed exchange festival organised by the Peliti alternative community, a Mesohori-based non-government organisation working to preserve Greece's vegetal wealth against an encroaching [global economy](#).

"We are doing something important here," beamed Grigoris Papadopoulos, a 60-year-old agronomist whose "green" epiphany came a decade ago after years of selling pesticide to farmers.

"I realised that money is not as important as quality of life, I saw the dirt in farm chemicals," said Papadopoulos, who came to trade his wild peach and apricot seeds.

Started in 1995, Peliti's drive to "to collect, distribute and rescue traditional seed varieties" (www.peliti.gr) has drawn notice among organic farming proponents across Europe.

The continent is caught between strong popular opposition to GM foods and pressure from major American GM producers such as Monsanto

who say that European bans on such products are illegal as they breach global trade rules.

Only two [GM-crops](#) are currently authorised in the European Union -- a maize strain for [animal feed](#) and a potato for paper-making. Decisions on a lengthening list of others are in deadlock.

An internal EU survey found half the 27-member bloc's states see no benefit from genetically modified crops, the European Commission said in April.

Greece -- where farming tends to be less industrialised than in other parts of Europe with many farmers collecting and reusing their own seeds -- is one of seven EU states that has stopped farming Monsanto's GM corn. And the country's agriculture ministry has hailed Peliti's effort as "positive".

Organisers said about 5,000 people showed up at this year's fair in the foothills of the Rhodope mountains between Greece and Bulgaria, 700 kilometres (435 miles) from the capital Athens.

Under a blazing sun, crowds milled around tables featuring varieties from the southern island of Crete to the northeastern region of Thrace, including tomato roots and seeds to grow organic courgettes, beetroots, melons, watermelons and herbs.

"Around 4,000 plant types were distributed to organic growers and supporters from all over Greece but also from France, Germany, Turkey and the United States," said Peliti founder Panagiotis Sainatoudis.

With the country's strong agricultural background, farm produce still features prominently among its exports.

"Due to its microclimate and the lack of rain, Greece has 6,000 plant species -- half of what grows in Europe -- including 1,200 unique genetic variations," Sainatoudis told AFP.

"The tradition of taste and aromas is still going strong," added Sophia Gida, an event organiser. "People come here specifically looking for Cretan tomatoes or fava beans from Santorini."

"Every seed is important but the seeds from my mother are more important, and of my grandparents much more important," said Arif Sen, a grower from Marmara in Turkey.

But even the staunchest supporters of organic living can see the difficulty in resisting the mass appeal of cheap crops.

"Those who have money eat well, but the poor will still eat modified," Papadopoulos said. "Through our behaviour, we need to force the state to respect us."

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