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Seed pellets to save Mt Pendeli

Forest fire damage near Anthousa to be remedied with Manasobu Fukuoka's Natural Farming method

Panayiotis Manikis (r) and volunteers unload bags of seed balls on a previous sowing project in Attica in the photo at left. Below left: Firefighters battling a blaze on Pendeli, the site of the next sowing of seed balls in early October to revegetate the mountain.



By Yvette Varvaressou - Kathimerini English Edition

Anthousa, a district on Mount Pendeli devastated twice by fires in recent years, is to be sown with a variety of plants next month using the Natural Farming method developed by Japanese visionary Manasobu Fukuoka and used widely in Greece by volunteers led by Panayiotis Manikis, a farmer from Edessa, northern Greece.

The method consists of sowing clay pellets containing seeds of a variety of plants. No further action is needed and no water other than rainfall. In fact, it is one of the basic tenets of the method that first come plants and then rain. "If we manage to sow 10,000 hectares, we can call the rain..." says Fukuoka.

"Deserts don't happen because there is no rain, rather rain stops falling because vegetation has disappeared. The construction of a dam in the desert is an attempt to cure the symptoms of the disease but it will not increase rainfall. First we have to learn how to restore the old forests," he says.

The seed mixtures are encased in a ball of red clay and soil humus which act as a miniature environment of nutrients and beneficial soil microbes. The clay contains enough moisture to keep the seeds viable and protects them from being eaten by birds and animals. They are spread on the ground and wait for rain to melt the clay, allowing the seeds to sprout.

Experience shows that seeds from forest trees have a much better chance if they are sown together with a wide variety of other seeds. Having a large variety ensures that at least some of the seeds will take root — the fittest will survive and flourish.

"The key to success and balance is variety," Fukuoka has said.

The clay pellets are formed in cement mixers, loaded into sacks and trucked to the sites where armies of volunteers fan out over the site to be sown, scattering pellets as they go.

On larger-scale projects, pelleted seeds can be sown from airplanes; this has already been done in Greece, as well as abroad in Tanzania and India, among other places.

Manikis was inspired by Fukuoka's writing to go to Japan to study his methods at close hand and, in the spring of 1998, Fukuoka and Manikis launched the "Greenbelt Southern Europe" initiative aimed at halting desertification and recreating fertile soils. The first large-scale aerial sowing of 10,000 hectares, led by Fukuoka, took place at Lake Vegoritis in northern Greece in 1998. European volunteers, several hundred pupils, students and farmers sowed 7 tons of seed pellets over 2,500 hectares.

Manikis and his associates, along with a network of volunteers from around the world, have already sown a number of areas in Greece that have either been devastated by fire or eroded, using seed pellets made at their base near Edessa every September.

They have gone on to sow areas in Pella, the mountains of Aegaleo and Pikilos in Attica, Tzoumerka, Elassonas and many others.

Manikis said there is no formal organization or funding involved. The projects are self-funded, with some input from local authorities in the form of transport and accommodation.

"People have to realize that they have to do things themselves," Manikis told Kathimerini English Edition this week. He has stayed true to the spirit of self-reliance that first inspired him to begin his work, not seeking funding or other outside support. And while he is happy to discuss his work, he does not actively seek publicity.

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- Seed pellets to save Mt Pendeli

Next month's project is the sowing of a 90-hectare area of suburban forest on the lower slope of Mt Pendeli that has twice been razed by fire (in 1995 and 1998).

Thomas Bakalakos, the mayor of Anthousa, said the municipality was very pleased to have Manikis, his associates and volunteers move in to reforest the area, and said anyone was welcome to come and help.

Mt Pendeli is sorely in need of reforestation, having lost 6,884 hectares of pine forest in the 1995 fire and another 7,568 hectares in 1998, according to a research study by Athens University's biology department begun in 1996. Anthousa is in the heart of the fire-stricken region, which covers an area reaching from Drafi to Pallini and Nea Makri.

Manikis said seeds of a variety of forest species, as well as fruit trees and vegetables and grasses, would be planted.

The sowing in Anthousa will take place on October 8 and 9. For further information as to times and sites, call the Municipality of Anthousa, tel 210.666.6211.

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