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Watering wild fruit trees in a nursery (top); a reforestation area.

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Syria conserves wild fruit, nut trees and other crops

Tuesday, 4 November 2003: Syria is conserving local and indigenous wild varieties of fruit and nut trees — such as almond, apple, olive, pear and apricot — as well as field and forage crops in arid areas, to preserve the genetic diversity of plant species that are mainstays of its agricultural economy.

This is important in ensuring the livelihoods of farm communities, promoting agricultural productivity and safeguarding global biological diversity and environmental sustainability.

The project, begun four years ago, is part of a regional programme with funding from the [Global Environment Facility](#) (GEF) that UNDP is implementing in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. The GEF provided nearly US\$2 million for the initiative in Syria and the Government \$585,000 in kind.

A growing population and expanding rural and urban communities have led to fragmentation and loss of farmland, and farmers are turning to new crop varieties that produce higher yields. There is also overgrazing in some areas by livestock, mainly sheep and goats, decimating forage plants.

Conserving local and wild varieties is vital because loss of indigenous varieties can lead to severe problems of food security and vulnerability to famine if the non-traditional varieties relied on prove vulnerable to disease, pests or unusual climate conditions. Indigenous varieties are resistant to local diseases and adapted to a range of local climate conditions.

"This project focuses on protecting the environment and promoting effective use of natural resources to ensure agricultural sustainability for coming generations," said UNDP Resident Representative Taoufik Ben Amara. "The Government, in partnership with UNDP, is supporting the initiative, showing its commitment to implementing the Convention on Biological Diversity." The convention protects the variety of life on earth and the natural patterns it forms, the web of life of which we are a part of and upon which we depend.

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Through the project, government nurseries have propagated more than 300,000 wild fruit trees in Lattakia, in the north-west, and 200,000 more trees in other areas. The Department of Forestry now includes 10 to 15 per cent of these species in plans for planting new forests and in reforestation.

In Sweida, a hilly area south of Damascus, the project is rehabilitating 70 hectares of rangeland overgrazed by sheep and goats, demonstrating water harvesting techniques and regulating access to an additional 1,000 hectares of rangeland to limit overgrazing. In each area, gene banks for local and indigenous wild varieties have been set up, along with sites for testing them.

The project supported graduate study for seven staff and organized 38 training courses and workshops for more than 1,430 participants, including 391 women. It has reached out to 5,000 local farmers and school children in the area to teach them about the importance of conserving local varieties, and held a training course for 30 teachers. The Ministry of Education is preparing to include biodiversity conservation in schools' extra curricular activities.

With help from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), the initiative drafted national guidelines on access to and exchange of plant genetic resources and draft legislation has been presented to the Parliament.

The [International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas](#) (ICARDA), based in Tel Hadya, near the northern city of Aleppo, is coordinating the programme regionally, integrated with national activities in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian Authority. The International Plant Genetic Resources Institute and the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands are providing regional technical assistance and training.

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