



# Horticulture and the Mediterranean: Exploring Gardens in Greece

15 – 29 May 2023

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Fig 1. Karystos bay, Evia

## Introduction

2022 saw one of the hottest and driest summers on record in England. As horticulturists in the UK, increasingly we are going to be looking for plants that can cope in a future affected by global heating and more extreme weather patterns. Last summer, working in domestic – often unirrigated – gardens as a self-employed maintenance gardener, I saw and felt the effects of climate change on traditional ornamental planting.

I started at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in Autumn 2022, undertaking the one-year Specialist Certificate in Ornamental Horticulture. ‘Irrigation awareness’ training was being rolled out to all those working in the gardens at the time. The Mediterranean Garden at Kew was given as an example of an area which had thrived in the hot weather and something we should be learning from. As part of my year at Kew, I was encouraged to take two weeks abroad for what is referred to as the Kew ‘travel scholarship’. It was with this in mind that I set out on a two-week trip to Greece to visit and volunteer at Mediterranean-style Gardens in Greece.

# Aims and objectives

## **Work experience abroad**

Having only worked in gardens in the UK, I felt the opportunity to gain work experience at an ornamental garden in the Mediterranean would undoubtedly offer fresh ideas and novel working practices. It would offer the chance to cultivate and maintain both familiar and unfamiliar plants in a climate which is different from my own, but which I may need to adapt to. I aimed to achieve this by working at a relatively small garden with lots of opportunity for hands-on experience and discussion.

## **Botanising local flora**

I also wished to familiarise myself with the local, seasonal flora of Greece in situ and so I sought out recommendations for walking trails on Evia.

## **Meeting experts in the field**

Further to this, I intended to enrich my trip through visiting other Greek gardens and meeting other gardeners. Sparoza Garden, the headquarters of the Mediterranean Garden Society on the outskirts of Athens had caught my interest, having been developed by women and with a British Head Gardener, Lucinda Willan, currently resident there. Several people had also recommended to me that I meet with Eleftherios (Lefteris) Dariotis, a Greek gardener and plantsperson to see his nursery and the gardens he has been advising on at the Vorres museum in Paiania.

## **Expanded plant knowledge**

Being able to offer expertise in drought-tolerant planting aligns with my future aspirations and I hope my experiences and the plant knowledge gained will be taken with me wherever my career takes me in horticulture, particularly when it comes to selecting plants for their sustainability and health.

# Itinerary

- 15 - 22 May 2023  
Volunteering at the private gardens of the 'Evia Island Garden Club'
- 23 May 2023 – Tour of the Ellinikon Experience Park, Athens
- 25 May 2023
  - Volunteering at Sparoza Garden
  - Tour of the Vorres Museum gardens by museum Director Nektarios Vorres and planting advisor Eleftherios Dariotis
  - Tour of Eleftherios Dariotis' experimental dry garden and plant nursery
- 26 - 28 May 2023 – Exploring green spaces in Athens



Fig 2. On the ferry to Evia



# Locations visited

## **Evia Island Garden Club**

Evia Island Garden Club consists of two adjoining private gardens, which have played host to professional gardeners over the years. There is half an acre of terraced, sloping hillside, with a mature, subtropical garden, a newly planted garden created by designers Jennifer Gay and Piers Goldson, as well as an olive grove, and a small arboretum. The garden is attached to Villa Kastelli, a retreat centre and holiday let. The owner, Lilian Lorenz, provides practical, hands-on experience for gardeners to learn from her many years working with plants adapted to the Greek climate. Lilian generously offered to host me in the village allowing me to participate in the daily maintenance of the extensively planted landscape as well as exploring the local wild flora.

## **Sparoza Garden**

Sparoza is a historic garden on the outskirts of Athens created by Jaqueline Tyrwhitt in the 1960s. For 20 years Jacky grew plants suited to the harsh climate of its Greek hilltop location. The garden was bequeathed to the Goulandris Natural History Museum and Sally Razelou became its custodian and continued to live and develop the garden until she passed away in 2021. It is now looked after by Head Gardener Lucinda Willan on behalf of the Mediterranean Garden Society.

## **Vorres Museum and Gardens**

The Vorres Museum contains a collection of folk and contemporary art with courtyard gardens surrounding it. In recent years, plantsperson Eleftherios Dariotis has worked as a consultant on the planting. The courtyards have large established beds and areas with pots, while a new dry garden, not yet open to the public, is in development at the back of the museum building.

## **The 'Goat Garden' and nursery of Eleftherios Dariotis**

Eleftherios is a horticulturist and botanist based between his hometown of Paiania, a suburb of Athens, and Crete. In Paiania he has developed an unirrigated garden known as the 'goat garden', for its resemblance to the goat-nibbled, phrygana landscape of Greece's countryside. Close by, he also keeps his plant and seed nursery, including an extensive collection of salvias in Paiania.

# Summary of the trip



Fig 4. The view from the village

## Village life on Evia

I spent eight days volunteering for Lilian Lorenz, a warm, generous woman, half English, half Greek, with a passion for horticulture. I stayed in a cottage with a view of the medieval Genoese castle Castello Rosso and the bay of Karystos. The majority of my time was spent tidying up the large, established, terraced garden of Villa Kastelli in anticipation for the summer season of guests and holidaymakers coming to stay there.

Tasks included the shredding and composting of *Malva sylvestris* – grown enormous and woody in the more nutrient-rich ground of Lilian's garden as opposed to the dry rocks of the diminutive wild mallows growing elsewhere. Several mornings were spent trimming the hedges, including *Pittosporum tobira* and *Teucrium fruticans*, used as important windbreaks. The many meadow areas were going over, requiring cutting down, making more space for the raised beds in the vegetable garden. The *Acanthus mollis* was past its



best, from which we collected and sowed seed. The garden consists of many common Mediterranean plants from species of *Lavandula*, *Thymus* and *Salvia* as well as other plants suited to the climate such as *Bulbine frutescens*, native to South Africa.

I also had the opportunity to explore the garden of Lilian's home, Villa Livano. Designed by Jenny Gay, Mediterranean-themed herbaceous perennials, grasses and climbers fill the spaces around existing mature trees including a stupendous old *Quercus robur*. The colours were calm and cool, with the *Stipa tenuissima* and *Oenothera lindheimeri* gently swaying in the breeze. Neither garden was a dry, gravel garden, with provision for sustainable watering making for a feeling of abundance as bees buzzed and butterflies fluttered in every direction.



Fig 5. The planting at Villa Livano

Working with Lilian provided plenty of opportunity for discussing the world of horticulture within Greece, from the sourcing of plants and planting methods to irrigation, composting green waste and aesthetic styles.



## Wild flora

My accommodation was in the foothills of Mount Ochi and a short hike from the ruins of an Eleventh-Century Byzantine fortress, later occupied by the Venetians, called Castello Rosso. The climb starts with a ruined aqueduct where I was able to find many flowers growing wild which I think of as garden plants here in the UK.

The landscape was like nothing I'd really seen before, having only been to Greece in late summer and autumn in the past. Mounds of acid-green *Euphorbia acanthothamnus* roam between pretty pastels of *Cistus creticus*, *Lavandula stoeches*, *Pseudodictamnus acetabulosus* and *Micromeria graeca* alongside the bright yellows of *Phlomis fruticosa*, *Ferrula communis* and the occasional bright pink of *Gladiolus italicus*. Nestled in the rocks of the castle was *Campanula celsii* subsp. *carystea*, a rare subspecies endemic to the south-east of Evia.

I had hoped to go on a longer hike to the ancient quarries of Ochi, but as the Greek elections were taking place, the local guide was on a pilgrimage back to his hometown to vote. Something for next time!



Fig 6. The view from Castello Rosso



Fig 7. *Campanula celsii* subsp. *carystea*

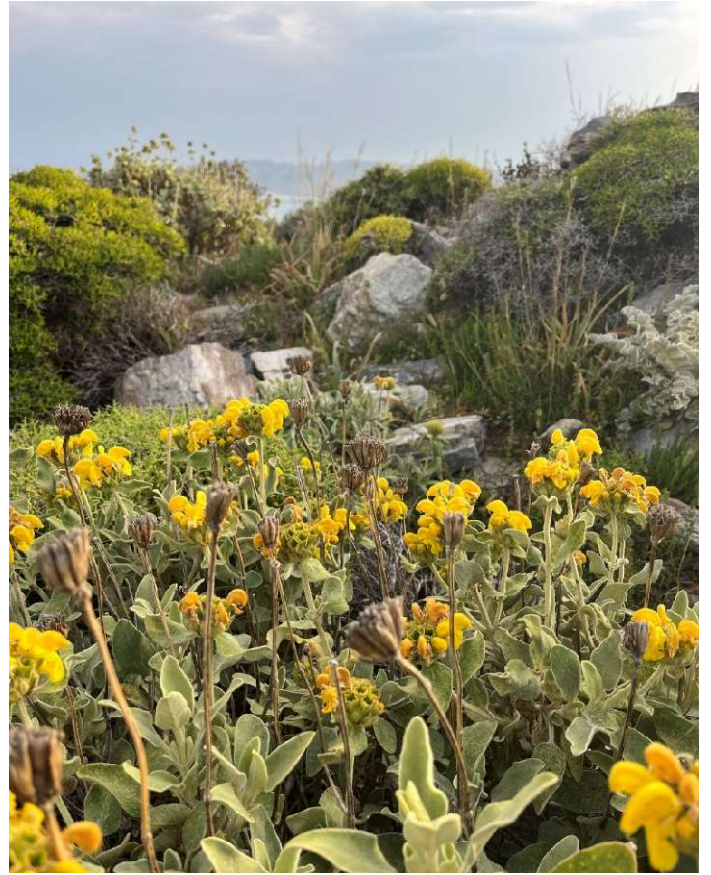


Fig 8. *Phlomis fruticosa* on the phrygana below the castle



Fig 9. Walking down towards the aqueduct

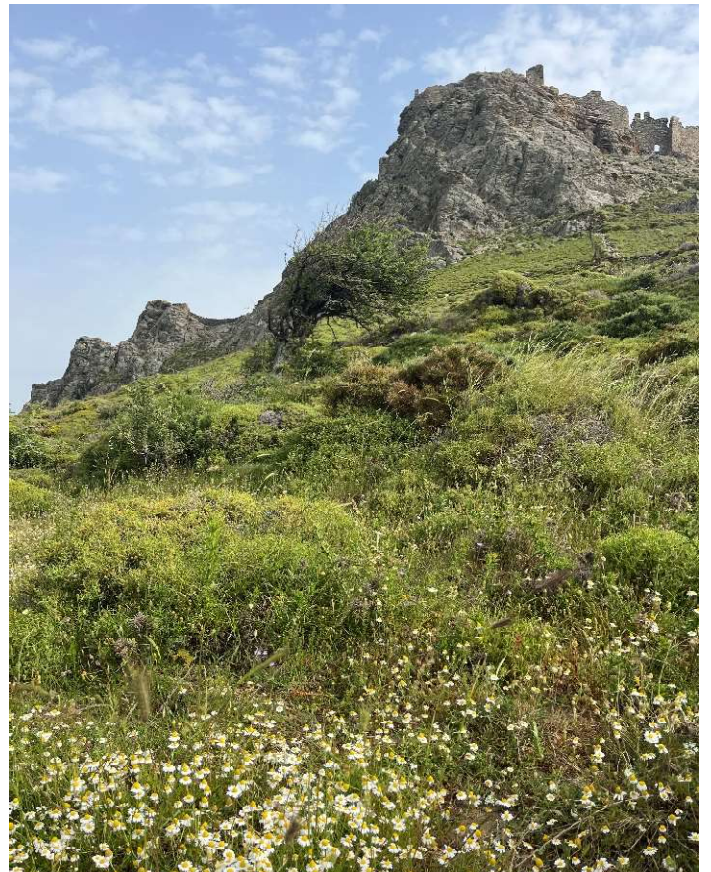


Fig 7. Wildflowers at the base of the hill

## Horticultural Paiania

After my time on Evia, I took the ferry back to the mainland and stayed at a B&B in Paiania, a suburb of Athens with several horticultural highlights.

### Sparoza

I spent a morning with volunteers at Sparoza, beautifully looked after by gardeners Lucinda Willan and Matina Galati. The garden is on an exposed hilltop and receives hardly any water. By May it was already in its 'Autumn' phase when many plants are going over, so it was lots of deadheading and seed collecting on the agenda.

The garden still had plenty of interest, with roses flowering around the house. The *Salvia fruticosa*, *Melianthus major* and aloes all being deadheaded that day still provided varied and interesting foliage. Plants were not just from Greece, but also South Africa, California, Mexico and Australia. Many *Cistus* cultivars were still in flower and glorious *Salvia canariensis* (pictured towering behind me, below) in full flower.



Fig 8. Seed collecting at Sparoza

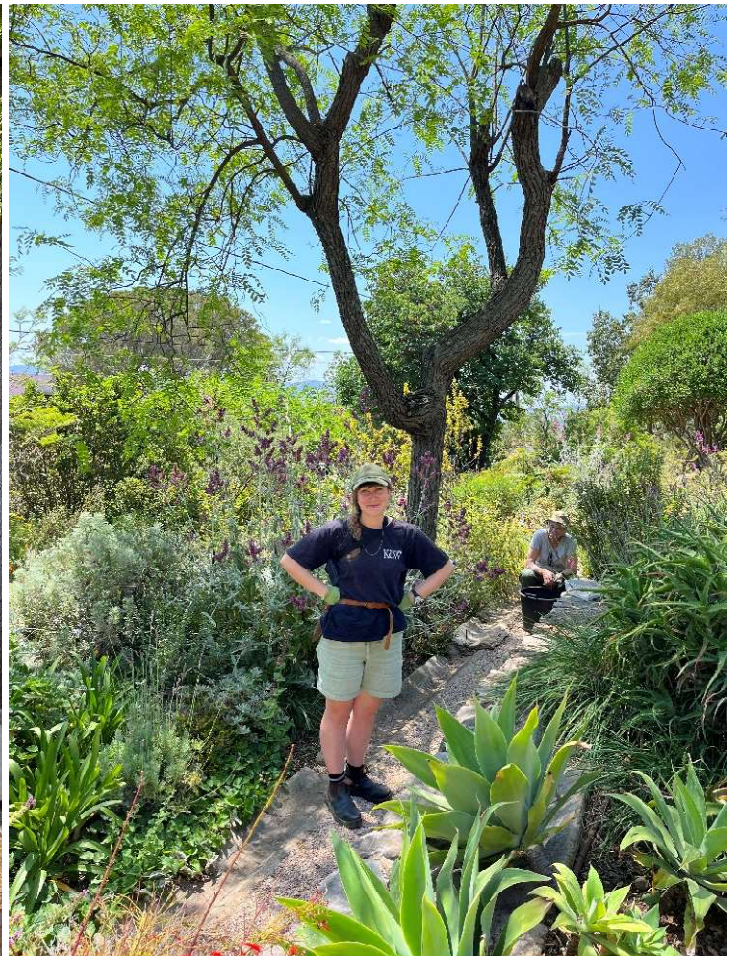


Fig 9. Stood in front of the *Salvia canariensis*

## Vorres Museum and Gardens

In my research about the gardens of Greece, many people had recommended I meet the horticulturist Lefteris Darios. Lefteris studied plant biology at UC Davis and horticulture at the University of Reading before returning to Greece with the aim to diversify the plants available in plant nurseries and to promote drought-tolerant gardening. He first took me to see the gardens at the Vorres Museum, where he has been consulting on the planting. The gardens are a vibrant and lush series of courtyards surrounding the museum building, with some irrigation and a gardener attending once a week.

I felt very lucky to be given a tour by Lefteris and the Director Nektarios Vorres of the dry garden on a large slope at the back of the museum which has been in development for four years. Last year it didn't receive any water except where freshly planted. It is being developed gradually and patiently, the pandemic having slowed the project down. Many of the plants have been grown from seed and cuttings collected by Lefteris or sourced from the pioneer of dry gardening, Olivier Filippi.



*Fig 10. Looking across the dry garden at the Vorres Museum*

In the golden hour light, I was taken aback by the beauty of the garden. I was told they hoped to open to the public in a year or so. The museum receives a lot of school visitors so it could be an interesting space for teaching about drought-tolerant plants and the future of horticulture with the climate in mind.



Fig 12. Another view of the dry garden at the Vorres Museum



Fig 11. *Convolvulus floridus*

### The 'Goat Garden'

Next stop on my tour with Lefteris was his experimental dry garden (which surrounds the suburban home of relatives of his in Paiania). Rare plants collected from across Greece and the Canary Islands to the Americas spill out onto the pavement. I was overwhelmed by the variety of plants. Lefteris was reeling off the names of the many rare and often threatened species happily growing in this unirrigated space. A meadow to one side (best seen earlier in the year when its many bulbs were up) gets mowed down each summer. I

loved how locals could peer over the low wall to inspect this unusual garden. I was told that some have said that it reminds them of the mountains, which is pretty much the idea! This was a real horticultural highlight for me, from being able to see so many interesting and unique Mediterranean-style plants in such a small space to the aesthetic of it: unfussy and naturalistic. It felt very special.



*Fig 13. Lefteris Dariotis' 'Goat Garden' planting*

*Fig 14. Another view of the 'Goat Garden'*



## Bulb, seed and plant nursery

The final stop was the garden and nursery. Lefteris was so generous with his time, showing me his various projects. He has travelled extensively, collecting seeds, bulbs and cuttings along the way amounting to a collection of 6000 species, including masses of *Salvia*. All of his plants have a story as to how they reached his garden in the suburbs of Athens, making them all the more special. His collection of bulbs has moved to Crete where he is developing a new garden and nursery in the countryside, a really exciting endeavour. His knowledge and enthusiasm for plants and considerations around drought tolerance and being waterwise were impressive and inspiring.

Fig 15. A glimpse of Lefteris Dariotis' plant nursery



## The urban landscape of Athens

I had lots of opportunity to explore urban green spaces in Athens and beyond. Street trees included *Morus alba*, *Cercis siliquastrum* and *Citrus × aurantium*. Many people bemoaned the poor treatment of the trees by unknowledgeable tree surgeons, which reminded me of how we speak about London street trees back home.

### Ellinikon Experience Park, Athens

I attended a tour organised by the Mediterranean Garden Society of Ellinikon, a new municipal park in development in Athens with landscape design by Thomas Doxiadis. On the site of a former airport, the site encompasses 70 acres, much of which is still in development, but an area was already complete for visitors to see. They had made interesting use of the existing hard surfaces including turning slabs of concrete into benches. Many plants and trees had been kept or transplanted with many other endemic plants added. The signage spoke of respect for people and the environment and the importance of sustainability, so it all felt exciting and promising. It was very beautiful with large swathes of *Oenothera lindheimeri* and the scent of *Origanum vulgare* subsp. *hirtum* in the air. There was some discussion of how the parkland would be maintained over the years and the use of rainwater collected from the hills.



Fig 16. Ellinikon Experience Park



Fig 20. *Punica granatum* at the National Garden

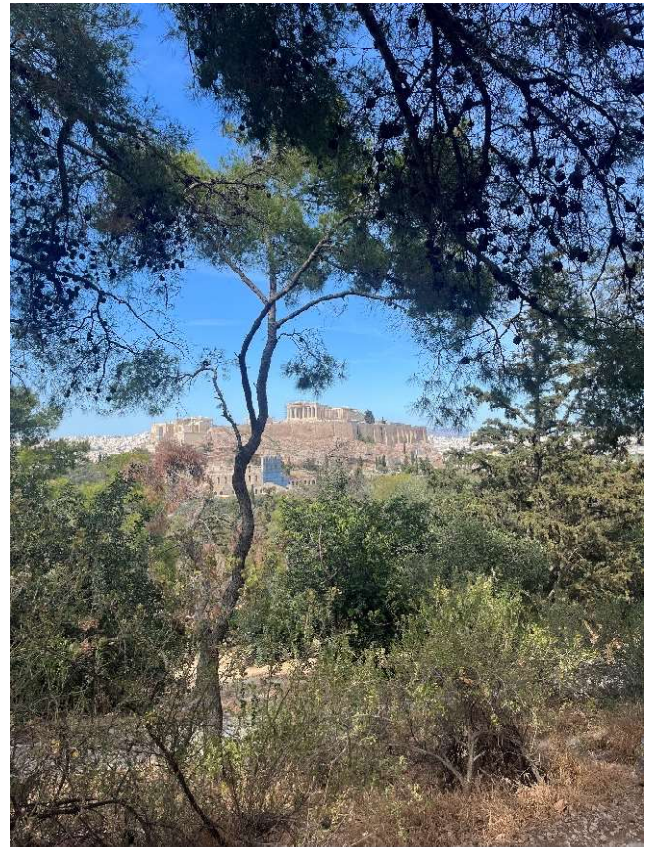


Fig 21. The Acropolis seen from Philopappos Hill

I brought forward my time in Paiania by a day in order to meet Lefteris Dariotis and found I'd have more time to explore Athens. Having spent ten days in Greece, I endeavoured to learn more about its history, visiting the Acropolis, the Archaeological Museum and the Benaki Museum. I climbed Philopappos Hill, with a heavy fragrance of *Pinus*, for some amazing views of the city and the Parthenon in the distance.

### Athens National Garden

The national gardens in the centre of Athens were a green oasis from the 35°C heat. Mostly trees were of interest as this time of year. There were flowering *Punica granatum* and *Jacaranda mimosifolia*. *Citrus × aurantium* fruits covered the ground. *Acanthus mollis* acted as ground cover.

# Conclusion

The lasting memory of my time on Evia will be the unique rocky 'phrygana' landscape with its many wildflowers and nimble goats. The opportunity to really spend time botanising was new to me and is something I will seek to do more in future. I hope I might be able to go on an organised study tour to learn in greater detail and share the experience with other likeminded people. I would like to return in spring when many Mediterranean bulbs are at their best.

I really enjoyed helping Lilian in the upkeep of her labour-of-love garden. It has cemented in my mind that my next step after Kew is the right one: working as a self-employed gardener in my local area caring for people's gardens.

Returning from my trip to Greece, I started working on the Mediterranean and Africa section of the Rock Garden at Kew. This was a brilliant opportunity to work with some of the plants I had seen out there and to learn more about plants from areas with similar requirements such as the Canaries, Turkey, and the Cape Provinces.

While in Greece, I had hoped I might learn more about which Mediterranean plants are suitable for UK climates. I was able to see many flourishing plants, but it was not necessarily clear to me how transferrable the more tender *Salvia*, *Lavandula* etc. would be. Writing this in August 2023, I can look back at the long, frosty winter we experienced in London and the wet summer we're experiencing now, so different from last year and say pragmatism is still going to be key. With wildfires having blighted Greece, including near where I stayed on Evia, the future climate is so harsh and unpredictable that we horticulturists will have to be nimble with our plant selections. It seems to me that Mediterranean plants will do well with dryer summers, but may still not be suitable on London clay, for example, without winter protection for the time being.

# Final Budget

Flight to Athens (Ryanair)	£116
Flight to London (Easyjet)	£235
B&B in Paiania x 2 nights	£125
Airbnb in Athens x 3 nights	£335
Taxi to airport	£95
Ferry to/from Athens-Evia x 2	£50
Taxi to B&B	£30
Taxi to Athens	£30
Metro tickets incl. to airport	£15
Food (paid by card)	£270
Cash expenditure (incl. food)	£150
Museum entries (own expense)	£36
	<b>£1,487</b>

I am grateful to the RHS for supplying £450 of funding. I received a further £500 from the Hardy Plant Society Kenneth Black Bursary Scheme and an award of £500 from the Kew Guild.

Signed:



# Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to Lilian Lorenz for being the loveliest of hosts while I was on Evia. I felt so welcomed and look forward to a continued friendship.

I would also like to thank Michelle Cain for her correspondence, recommending Evia as a good starting off point for my Greek adventure.



*Fig 22. Me and Lilian Lorenz at Villa Kastelli*

Thank you to Lucie Willan for inviting me to join the volunteer morning at Sparoza. It was a busy period, and I really appreciated the opportunity.

Thanks also to Lefteris Dariotis for being so generous with his time and sharing his years of experience and plant knowledge.

And of course, thank you so much to the RHS, Hardy Plant Society and Kew Guild for facilitating opportunities such as this through their bursary schemes.

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<https://www.mediterraneangardensociety.org/sparoza.html>
- Lefteris Dariotis  
<https://www.mediterraneanseedsandbulbs.com/>
- Vorres Museum and Gardens  
<https://www.vorresmuseum.gr/eng>

## **Full-page image captions**

Cover page: *The MGS Garden at Sparoza*

Page 5: *Walking down the steps at Villa Kastelli after a morning of hedge trimming*

Page 9: *View of the meadow at Villa Kastelli*