

[You win some, you lose some]

A failed experiment, an error in your model, a rejected article: in academia such things tend to be labelled failures. As for talking about failure? Not done! But that's just what WUR co-workers do in this regular feature, 'You win some, you lose some'. Because failure can be useful. In this instalment, we hear from Gerlinde De Deyn, Personal Professor of Soil Ecology. Text and illustration Stijn Schreven

'In February 2006, I went to Lancaster University in England for my second postdoc. I was determined to prove myself as a researcher. I immediately started setting up a large field experiment involving 6000 plants. The aim was to see how the diversity and combination of the plants could promote carbon and nitrogen storage in the soil. I was under some time pressure because in April the seedlings – which I had painstakingly grown in the preceding weeks – had to be planted out. With the help of five colleagues, the planting of the different plant communities was done in less than a week. 'But then things went wrong. While it normally rains almost non-stop in that part of England, that particular spring was bone-dry. My nickname became Gerty Hosepipe because I kept going into the field to water the plants. To no avail. I kept going for a month, even though I knew it wasn't going to work out. I felt like a real failure then. I won-

dered whether I should go back to Belgium and switch careers. 'Then I realized: whatever comes out of this doesn't reflect what those little plants can actually do. In the end, I took the decision to

'My nickname became Gerty Hosepipe'

repeat the whole experiment. I got a

lot of support from the technical assistant, who I saw as a mother figure. She emphasized that the research was my responsibility. I was no longer a PhD student and I had to make my own decisions now, including difficult ones like deciding to redo the trial. But once the decision was made, I went all out again.

'You cannot control everything and no matter how well you plan things, something always goes wrong. The experience taught me to think in scenarios as a researcher. There is always a solution.'

