



Perennials provide balance

With a non-farming background, David Holder and Robyn McClintock embarked on a steep learning curve when they returned to Robyn's family farm in 1994. Perennial pastures, crossbred ewes and a system that embraces an all critical balanced approach to life have become the basis of their farming system. David discussed with Catriona Nicholls the path they have taken since becoming involved in farming.

"Robyn and myself both spent some time in Sydney studying before doing some overseas travel. We were living and working in Canberra but found ourselves spending most of our weekends travelling back to the farm before taking up an offer to become actively involved in 1994 in the *Mannamite Pastoral* partnership with Robyn's parents Bob and Noeleen McClintock," David said.

"Robyn has established her own aquatic physiotherapy practice from home, allowing her to work alongside me during winter and early spring when we are sowing and lamb marking. During her busiest period, from September till May, Robyn works school hours so she can be there for our three children.

Balance is important to us as we have other interests outside the farm, and spending time away allows you to remain focused and enthusiastic about what you are doing. We are always trying to think of ways to make what we do more efficient and a lot of energy is devoted to working smarter, not harder.

Perennial pastures play a definite role in achieving that balance - firstly, they reduce the amount of feeding we do during summer, even with the recent dry seasons.

A new approach

When we first came back to the farm Bob was running a flock of Corriedales. We decided to focus on one sheep enterprise and put all

key points

- Perennial pastures reduce supplementary feeding and support a better life balance
- Soil pH and weed control is critical to successful lucerne establishment
- A lucerne/sub-clover approach provides year-round pasture growth and feed for livestock.

farm info.

Case study: David and Robyn Holder

Location: Cootamundra, New South Wales

Property size: 970 ha plus a further 364 ha leased

Mean annual rainfall: 550 mm

Soils: Clay loams

Enterprises: Balance composite crossbred ewes and mixed cropping (wheat, canola, triticale and oats)



Photo: Pamela Lawson

Robyn and David Holder (above) have found perennial pastures such as lucerne allow them to work smarter, not harder within their livestock enterprises.

our efforts into it. After an analysis of our soil types, topography, climate and general farm structure we decided that prime lamb production was most suited.

After 50 years of breeding his Corriedale flock, my father-in-law had a sound understanding of how to run a self-replacing sheep operation and we capitalised on his experience. Initially, we bought first cross ewes and crossed a portion of them with Coopworths to provide our ewe replacements. We joined the balance to Dorsets bought through a local ram buying group. More recently we have introduced Gromark rams to gain even more control of the maternal genetics of our sheep.

To support the enterprise change we needed to revamp the pastures. Back in 1994 there were a few old Australian phalaris paddocks and a couple of tired lucerne stands. No lime had been applied and the challenge was to establish some productive pastures.

With an urban planning background, the first year I spent on the farm I think I wasted a lot of time on a fergie tractor slashing thistles, making the farm look nice. I soon realised that tidy paddocks don't drive profitability or production.

While I didn't know agriculture, I knew how to research and assimilate information and got my hands on as much material as I could. I checked out what the neighbours were doing and sought out systems that were productive, but efficient at the same time.

Pretty much the things that work for us are fairly uniform across our area. We have a mix of lucerne/sub-clover pastures on the better soil types and phalaris/clover pastures on the lighter, sandier soils.

The phalaris pastures are important to our system for maintaining our composite ewes with a minimum of supplementary feeding, while the lucerne/sub-clover paddocks are critical for achieving maximum weight gains in our lambs.



We started by sowing pure lucerne stands during spring but found that in following winters we had too much bare ground between lucerne plants. Our advisor, Greg Condon, recommended sowing a mix of sub-clover and lucerne in winter to give us more groundcover.

Our confidence in pasture establishment has improved as we have acquired better technology. Five years ago we bought an Agrodriill and since then we have not had a failure in establishing a pasture – even in the most trying of seasons.

Ongoing improvement

Other things we have done to improve our system include looking at paddock boundaries in relation to topography, soil types and natural features. At opportune times we have changed fence lines to create more homogenous paddocks, that although still retain some diversity, enable us to crop and run sheep more efficiently.

Weed control is critical to successful pasture establishment. We clean our paddocks with a 3-4 year cropping rotation before establishing pastures under a final cover crop – usually with a hard wheat variety at a sowing rate of 10-15kg/ha. Pastures are retained until they decline in productivity – usually indicated by a drop in desired species plant density.

One thing I have observed anecdotally is the production of newly sown perennial pastures in their first year of grazing far outstrips pastures sown in previous years. This is particularly the case with lucerne/sub-clover paddocks and I'm unsure of the exact reasons, but think it must be linked to higher nutrient levels following the cropping phase and a lack of weed competition. Last season, undersown lucerne was growing out of the top of the wheat cover crop and our contract header driver couldn't believe his eyes.

It's tempting to graze paddocks like these straight after the header has gone out the gate, but you have to leave them alone during that first summer and autumn. When you get to the autumn break you can start grazing, preferably with lambs. In our district when you get to the third week in August in a normal season, you can be guaranteed that you won't be able to eat the feed off.

Keys to success

I'm fastidious about weed control – it is really important, especially with summer fallows, as keeping them clean conserves moisture and nutrients. Sowing technique is also critical, making sure you don't get too greedy with the cover crop.

Nutrient levels and lime are also important. Our soils are quite acidic and so regular testing is required to gauge whether a top up of lime is required to avoid aluminium toxicity before sowing perennial pastures.

Grazing management is just absolutely critical to the long-term sustainability of perennial pastures. We have cereal stubbles and phalaris paddocks that allow us to set stock our ewes over summer and avoid time-consuming hand feeding. Lucerne stands are managed a little differently.

Come late winter and through spring, we can bring ewes off grazing cereals and phalaris pastures to lamb on lucerne/sub-clover paddocks. After weaning in early November lambs are given preferential grazing treatment, while ewes are boxed together.

We are pretty happy with our system and aim to upgrade the last of our older paddocks in the next 12 months to get them back in shape for our lambing ewes in spring.”

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By Greg Condon

- **The team at Mannamite Pastoral (David, Robyn and Bob) work efficiently on key goals in their farm business. To achieve these goals they stick to a limited number of enterprises and manage them well. This includes prime lambs, wheat and canola, which are rotated with a pasture base of lucerne/sub-clover or phalaris/sub-clover.**

The management associated with each enterprise is carried out using modern practices, such as no-till seeding and tramline farming for crops or fodder budgeting and rotational grazing for pastures. A switch to late winter/spring lambing in recent years has brought added benefits in lower autumn feed costs along with increased lamb weight gain and pasture utilisation in spring.

Feed planning is a key feature of the grazing system at Mannamite. David and the team always plan ahead to determine what feed will be available for each class of sheep. This includes

locking ewes up in droughtlots during late summer/autumn to reduce soil erosion and to allow lucerne pastures a spell before lambing.

With a mid-winter stocking rate of 14 DSE/ha, grazing cereals such as wheat and triticale are used to minimise supplementary feeding costs during this time, when pasture growth rates are low.

When lambing starts during mid August the ewes are turned onto the lucerne/sub-clover or phalaris/sub-clover pasture for five weeks before being boxed and rotated in larger mobs during spring/summer. This is when the perennial pastures, such as lucerne, come into their own. With thorough weed control and fertility they can carry lactating ewes and lambs through to November and run the weaned lambs during summer with minimal supplementary feeding.

The Mannamite team manage their pastures with similar systems to those used for the winter crops. Weeds such

as Patersons curse and Shepherds purse are controlled and regular soil testing is carried out to gauge soil phosphorus, sulphur and pH levels.

Grazing management is a major driver of production with perennials at Mannamite especially during late summer/autumn. At this time the ewes are removed from the perennial pastures onto stubbles or into droughtlots to maintain groundcover and preserve plant carbohydrates for maximum production in late winter/spring.

- **Greg Condon, Grassroots Agronomy, works with producers to achieve practical and profitable outcomes for their business.**

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