

## Googa Farms

# Daring and diversity

By HOLLY VYNER

Googa Farms is situated in the beautiful Googa region just out of Blackbutt, 150 kilometres north-west of Brisbane, on rich red basalt soil up to 20 metres deep. The 200-hectare farm consists of 7000 bearing avocado trees with the rest being for broad-acre and vegetable farming.

The property is run by the Beutels, a family of four. Terry and Fay Beutel started farming the property in 1963. Now their sons Anthony and David run the property, with Terry overseeing and Fay carrying out the administration.

Avocados – about 50,000 trays a year – are the farm's core product. Other produce over the years has included snowpeas, soyabeans, peanuts, cereal crops, corn, zucchinis, beans and potatoes and 1000 vines of chokoes.

### WHY ORGANICS?

Terry, Fay, Anthony and David converted the farm to organic eight years ago. The reason, says Anthony, is that "organic farming is common sense. It's healthy for us, our employees, consumers and the soil.

"With organic farming you are working with nature to achieve maximum nutrition in the soil, which naturally protects the plants from pests and disease. With conventional farming you are working against nature, thus creating more work and problems in the long run."

"Herbicides and pesticides hinder the plant's growth and then fertiliser is needed to help the plant to grow again. The inputs are poisonous to the soil and our health and, what's more, are an added expense to production."

The Beutels have also found farming organically has had health benefits for the family, particularly in relation to asthma.

"Organic farming takes no short cuts to deal with pests and weeds and can be more labour intensive and expensive in the beginning," says Anthony. "However, the effort is well worth it in the end."

### GENERAL FARM MANAGEMENT

One thing apparent about this property is its diversity. Openness to new ideas and experimentation to improve quality and yields has helped Googa Farms to expand into the farm it is.

Sheep roam between the avocado trees – an experiment, says Anthony. "They are great for keeping the weeds down and add manure to the soil, however they also like to eat the skirts (overhanging leaves)! We have found that if we wait until the leaves on the trees have hardened after a flush there is less damage as they tend to like the new softer leaves."

As we drive past, a new lamb appears from under a tree. "The lambs are organic and will be sold for meat to organic meat wholesalers and butchers."

**MULCHING:** Mulching is important. General tree mulch and sorghum forage after harvest is put under the avocado trees. "Avocados are great as they are fantastic self-mulchers," says Anthony. "After four years they mulch themselves. Soil tests

have shown that these avocados are grown in some of the best soil ever tested."

Anthony can't believe that at some avocado properties he has visited there is bare soil underneath the trees. Avocado trees are surface root feeders. The roots grow into the mulch – they need regular watering and for the mulch to be kept up. The avocados produced at Googa Farms are testament that using mulch and organic farming practices give superior results. Fewer inputs are used, the soil is healthier and the trees are expected to last up to 30 years, a third longer than many conventionally grown trees.

**NUTRITION AND INPUTS:** Inputs include Dynamic Lifter and Guano Gold, crusher dust, lime and compost from Soil Systems Australia around the avocado trees.

Inputs that are added through the irrigation system on crops include fish emulsion, lime and kelp.

Compost is also being experimented with but the volumes needed for 7000 trees have so far proved to be very labour intensive. However, it is proving to be beneficial. "The roots are denser and there is increased growth in general," says David.

The Beutels employ an enthusiastic full-time horticultural manager who is committed to looking after the nutritional side of the orchard and monitoring water distribution.

**WEED MANAGEMENT:** Weeds are controlled by the use of hot water around the trees to break the cell structure of the weed leaf before mulch is applied. The grass between rows is mowed or kept down by sheep. Cereal crops are weeded using inter-row tractoring and hand chipping.

**PEST AND DISEASE MANAGEMENT:** When required, the avocados are sprayed for pests with avocado oil, garlic powder and a few other oils. Trichogramma wasps are released to control the heolithios and caterpillars in the soyabeans. They are also used in the orchard to control other varieties of caterpillars.



Anthony Beutel in last winter's soyabean crop.



**“These avocados are grown in some of the best soil ever tested.”**

The main disease encountered is Phytophthora. Microbes and nutrient applications often suppress the disease with correct water management.

**BIODYNAMICS:** Further experimentation is in biodynamics. Although at present the preparations are bought, it has helped to cut down on fertiliser costs. “After only three or so months it’s difficult to say whether it has helped at this stage,” says Fay. “The trick to biodynamics is to get the soil nutrition right and then preserve it that way.

“The healthier the soil, the better plants can stave off pests and disease.”

### **WATER AND SURVIVING DROUGHT**

The semi-rainforest trees are an indication of the rainfall this area usually receives; yet the land is brown and dry. So far this year they have had only 25 millimetres of rain. It is said to be the worst drought in 100 years.

Water is pumped from bores into a dam and is supplemented with water from excess Blackbutt water supply.

Bores in the Yarraman and Gatton regions are drying up and water is slowing up in this area also, therefore measures have been taken to minimise usage. T-tape is used along the rows of snowpeas and other vegetable crops as opposed to previous methods of hand-line irrigation. Now only 5-10% of the amount of water is used and yields have also improved. The watering on the avocados has been upgraded and refined to save as much water as possible.

Anthony wonders how conventional farmers can cope much longer with crop after crop being lost due to the drought. In general, organic farming provides better water retention in soil due to better soil health. With avocados, David says that some farmers spray the weeds around their trees with Roundup every four to six weeks and the soil is sometimes as hard as concrete. “Without mulching there is no protection for the plant and poor moisture retention in the soil.”

The Beutels have not been immune to the drought however. Forty hectares of soyabeans were lost due to the dry recently. They were flowering, needing only another 25-50mm of rain. They now stand bone dry and dead in the field. The Beutels won’t be planting winter crops this year due to the dry.

### **FINDING MARKETS**

Most of the produce is sold to wholesalers in most capital cities and some to local fruit shops. The soyabeans are sold to Kialla Pure Foods, as is the corn, which is made into cornflakes.

One problem they are facing is that there are too many avocado seconds being sold on the market, bringing down the price of top-quality fruit. They are now processing their seconds for oil to relieve the amount of product in the market.

### **PEANUTS**

A high-yielding crop of quality peanuts was harvested free of aflatoxin this year at Googa Farms, of which a sizeable portion is sitting in the cooler room waiting for a buyer.

As with some other agricultural products, organic peanuts are becoming difficult to sell because Chinese organic peanuts are flooding the market at about a fifth of the price of Australian-grown nuts. “Labour and manufacturing costs in China are nothing in comparison to our costs and there is no restriction (by the government) on imports,” Fay laments.

Some organic peanut growers are feeding their crops to animals as fodder.

The Beutels question the quality of the Chinese peanuts and are concerned about a potential free trade agreement with China. They are voicing these concerns to government at state and federal level. The response so far has been that globalisation of the food industry opens up the Australian market and provides new markets for Australian producers, although some will be adversely affected.

### **PROCESSING AVOCADO OIL**

The product the Beutels are most proud of is their cold-pressed avocado oil. They extract the oil themselves. Unlike some other avocado oil, this oil is made after discarding the seeds, which are known to be toxic. No salt is added and no solvents used.

Avocado oil has a higher heat tolerance than olive oil in cooking, meaning it doesn’t spit or burn as quickly. It is healthy and tasty for use on salads, pastas, vegetables, grilled foods and dipping bread. It has great benefits in relieving minor sunburn, moisturising dry and aging skin and as a massage oil base. ■