

Proving ground

Sustainability and the enduring productivity of their land is a driving force for the Schreurs family. A passion for knowledge and the courage to try new approaches has put the family at the forefront of sustainable vegetable production in Australia, writes Environment Coordinator Jordan Brooke-Barnett.



As founding growers in the EnviroVeg Program, Peter Schreurs and his sons Mark, Darren and Paul view environmental management as being central to their farming practices.

The family maintains a 400 acre property at Devon Meadows, south of Melbourne, employing 60 staff to grow, wash and pack leeks, radicchio, endive and cos lettuce for market. As major Victorian growers, the Schreurs family has long maintained its commitment to setting an example and further developing sustainable practices on site.

“As responsible custodians of this part of Australia, we believe that our farm should remain healthy and productive not only for the next 20 years, but for a hundred years and beyond,” said Peter Schreurs.

“Why we are at this point today, where we are so conscious of sustainability, came from the mid 1970s, when my boys were young. I had a small property and was growing intensively on limited acreage, as I wanted to grow more and was very conscious of maintaining the health of the soil.”

The Schreurs bought their current property in the early

1990s and developed it from scratch, reconditioning cattle land to develop a working vegetable farm. Effective planning was a foundation for ensuring that fuel and other farming inputs could be used efficiently and workflows could be managed to save time.

“The farm was planned with

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the dam and packing and washing sheds in the centre of the property to minimise travel,” he said.

“The windbreaks we have planted also prevent erosion and act as a habitat for local wildlife.”

“A lot of what we built here had to be developed from scratch, so we were always conscious of the need to sustainably develop the land and learn from any mistakes we

made along the way.”

As the farm has developed, so have the many techniques and investments the Schreurs have made to their property.

“The farm is my university, and I have learned so much over the years,” he said.

In the late 1990s, a breakout of two-spotted mite sparked

entomologist so we thought we might ask him to help us with the problem,” said Darren Schreurs.

“We asked him what to do and he said it is simple - just don't spray anymore. Apparently our previous spraying was killing the *persimilis* - a natural predator of the two-spotted mite. We were apprehensive and thought that we needed to spray as we had a pest.”

“I wasn't sure about it, so I did a small test at home with some *persimilis* and an aquarium and the results were 100% positive, with the crop mite-free.”

“We are constantly learning and trying new approaches in response to the challenges we face.”

“There was a fungicide which I was using that our entomologist said from initial testing was fine and wouldn't kill ladybirds. When we started using it, we realised that the ladybird numbers were dropping. After further study, he worked out that it sterilised the ladybirds. So we worked out that it was fine for use once or twice, but not regular sprays.”

Despite the challenges of the past decade, Darren Schreurs remains positive about the new approach to pest management.

“For 10 years I haven't

interest in Integrated Pest Management.

“I had seen the approach used in Europe in greenhouses and questioned whether it could be used in open fields. When I saw it being used in an open orchard I gathered as much information and discussed it with my sons.”

“In the year 2000, we had a problem with two-spotted mite in our leek crop. We heard a neighbour was engaging an



sprayed our leeks and had no disease problems."

"Back in 2000 we used a lot more broad spectrum chemicals, but now we use a lot more BTs to control cover crops like the Brassicas. We try and always retain beneficials to prevent resistance build-up."

"A lot of the chemicals we use today are soft, so we rotate them. The good thing is that a lot of the new chemicals on the market are residual, so I can use them knowing that we don't kill the beneficials."

Peter Schreurs agrees. "Chemical companies are starting to realise the need to develop softer and more targeted chemicals for use on properties practicing Integrated Pest Management," he said.

In recent years, the Schreurs' have diverted focus to their soil.

Future plans for the property involve commissioning a custom-engineered disc-based bedformer, which is intended to cause less of a disturbance to the soil than traditional rotary hoes.

"We are currently developing

a bedformer which will do the job without destroying the ecosystem in the soil. Practising minimum tillage makes sure we can keep the soil structure and keep a good environment for micro-organisms in the soil, and use less energy on the farm."

In addition, son Darren is also experimenting with a range of cover crops that work to improve soil structure between crops, as well as varieties such as mustard flower, which act as a natural fumigant for pests.

"We are growing more ground crops like rye corn, which is a good bulky crop, or a biofumigant, such as a mustard, which sweetens the soil and controls the disease. Following that on with leeks we usually get pretty good results."

Environmental stewardship remains an ongoing process for the Schreurs.

"We don't think we'll ever stop. My passion is that other growers can catch on to our sustainability philosophy and realise that these practices are best for the land in the long-term."



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