

SMALL FARMING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

Roz and Ainsley Curtis and their two children purchased their property in January 2002. They chose the property because it had a comfortable home and a good set of yards. They made the decision to lease out the land for a period of time in order to pay for improvements.



Why become lifestyle farmers?

Both of them grew up on farms so they enjoy the outdoor lifestyle and they wanted their children to grow up without the restrictions of life in town. The family showed cattle at the Mount Gambier Show for the first time this year and Roz and Ainsley believe that it helps their children to learn about responsibility and commitment by feeding and preparing the cattle for show and teaching them to lead and handle them. Their son Cameron has great delight in saying he beat his Mum by leading the first placed heifer (in her class) at the show. They also love to be able to send the kids out on their push bikes when they say they are bored in the school holidays and the other freedoms and benefits that come from a rural lifestyle farm.

Some facts about the Curtis' lifestyle farm from Roz and Ainsley...

The original focus was to breed purebred Salers cattle for beef production. The breed is known for its hybrid vigour and easy calving (due to their large pelvic areas); this was important as they can't always be on farm when they are calving due to work commitments. They also have

high fertility, early maturity, high milk yields, brief calving intervals, maternal behaviour and short gestation periods. "We decided to become a stud farm for the kids; to get them involved with the cows and have an opportunity to show them". As part of this Roz and Ainsley have made the decision to not currently sell on females. They are selling one male this year- and have a longer term plan to have stock for sale.

PROPERTY INFORMATION

Small Farmers Roz and Ainsley Curtis

Location OB Flat

Property Area 40 acres

Enterprises Cara Park Poll Saler Stud (23 animals including cows, calves, heifers and a quarter share in a bull) A fun and healthy lifestyle

Rainfall Approximately 700mm

The Curtis's have 23 animals including cows, calves, heifers and a quarter share in a bull. They have previously used artificial insemination but had too big a calving spread, so they purchased the share in the bull to condense the calving pattern and to act as a cover bull in future AI programs.

"Our pastures were fertilised as part of the lease agreement but improvement has been slow." Now they have had soil tests and will begin pasture renovation this summer, and will be applying Limestone to improve pH and cat ion exchange in the first step to allow better uptake of fertiliser.

Roz and Ainsley have their own spray unit and have done some weed and pest control.

They do their own fencing, but they got the first fence done by a contractor, due to the large number of strainers etc that was needed to be put in for the smaller paddocks. They use contractors for spreading limestone, fertiliser, and hay.

Cara Park originally had only two paddocks but the Curtis's re-fenced and now have 6 paddocks and a laneway, and will end up with 7 paddocks and a laneway. Paddock locations have been determined by trough location, original fence lines and the ability to allow one person to move stock without dogs, a motorbike or any assistance.

They started small so this year for the first time have had to buy in feed – in response to that, they have closed off a paddock for silage this year and got 109 bales when they were hoping for 30. They often go halves in hay with Roz's brother who has a similar sized property.

Roz and Ainsley are currently not profitable, but they are aiming to break even in the next two years. "If we do make a profit then we would probably just hold a party to celebratethe profit and be backwards again!"

What are the neighbours like?

Many people are concerned with more small rural properties popping up on the outskirts of town and the urban/ rural clash that this may bring. But the Curtis' love their neighbours and they even have neighbourhood 'cow' watch where a neighbour would ring if they noticed if a cow was starting to calve." This is very handy if you are at work when it happens!" They do try to be good neighbours and put the newly weaned calves into the paddock as far from the neighbours as possible.

Is it hard balancing paid jobs and farm work?

"We need more time". Roz explains it is hard to get things done in one or two days over the weekend plus ensure the kids meet their sporting commitments and that they have a social life as well.

Roz works 15 hours to 20 hours a week and Ainsley works fulltime. It is a different sort of lifestyle now, Roz is up at 6am to feed cows when prepping them for showing, and then takes kids to school and goes to work. "But it is so much better than the house in town with the tiny backyard". Ainsley is always working on some farm project or improvements for the farm on the weekends and after hours.

Were there any unexpected challenges?

Not really as they both have good farming backgrounds. However it is now harder to get things done on weekends as Ainsley no longer works shifts and doesn't get a block of days off to be able to spray /fence etc.

What can't you do as a lifestyle farmer that you could do as a larger scale farmer?

It would be great to have a larger number of animals to breed from to improve the selection process and quality. It is harder to experiment as they don't have machinery and have to rely on contractors and they don't have any spare land to put aside to do it.

What lessons have Roz and Ainsley learnt that may help other lifestyle farmers?

"If you are taking this on then both partners and the family have to be excited and involved." Also the part time partner needs to be able to move stock and to manage and feed them by themselves otherwise the other person is feeding out hay in the dark/rain during winter.

"If you are dealing with livestock, make sure that you can handle them safely. For us that is having laneways, good quality yards and a crush."

If planning on having a stud of any sort, then make sure you understand the rules around Johnes or any other disease that affects your species of animal, and be very careful about what you agist or lease onto your property. This could avoid the need to do expensive blood tests, monitoring and a lot of paperwork. They are Johnes free and clean, but it is an ongoing and expensive process to prove this. From an economic point of view it would be better to be commercial but then they couldn't show. They wanted to show as a hobby for the children. "This is a lifestyle choice, if we make a profit terrific, but our aim really is to break even."

Roz and Ainsley went to some small farm workshops put on by the SENRM Board. These were great as they were held at a time that they could attend and had some really useful information. They are keen to meet with the other small farmers from this course again in the future, it is great to learn and swap ideas.

WHAT IMPROVEMENTS HAVE YOU DONE AND WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO FOCUS ON IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS ?

Those improvements already done include:

- Fencing
- Many windbreaks
- Removing of very tall and old pine trees
- Purchase of cattle

Those improvements they hope to do:

- Improving pasture quality
- Increase cattle numbers a little more
- Monitor and improve the quality of the herd
- Get a bigger shed
- Another fence line and windbreak to go in