

ON THE FARM - THE GOOD DIRT

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Stan Artridge: It's just a bit of work

Ruffy's Stan Artridge knows keeping abreast of best-practice is the key to producing high quality 20-21 micron wool.

More than 40 years ago he embraced rotational grazing and it has paid off: he went from running 240 sheep and 40 cattle back in 1957, to now running 1600 ewes and weaners on his 130 ha (320 acre) property.



*Above a hand full of Dung Beetles
Below a Cockchafer*



He runs 40 sheep/ha for two days on cells that average two hectares. He moves his stock off the grazed cell when the grass is 75mm (three inches) high. Not grazing his pastures too low helps increase the organic matter in the soil, lessens soil water loss and increases bug activity.

The improved condition of his paddocks meant, that in the drought, Stan found his paddocks started a month earlier and finished two months later than

other paddocks in the district on similar soil types.

When it comes to his pastures Stan likes his "pasture of weeds" because he says they have greater diversity and he is happy to work with nature, not against it. Not even barley grass presents a problem. Stan reckons it is a good early feed.

He prefers cocksfoot and perennial and annual rye grasses in his pasture and reckons the growth of cocksfoot coincides well with the needs of his lamb and ewes.

Stan is aiming for organic carbon levels in his soils of five per cent or more; at a recent soil test interpretation day at Ruffy he noted most other farmers in the area were recording less than two per cent.

When it comes to soil biology, Stan is "not sure that the bad things are that". Since giving up using Lindane in his Super he has seen big changes. He reckons even cockchafers do a great job of recycling the dung and other material on the surface deeper in to the soil, even "320 acres of cockchafers can't eat everything". And he can't say enough about dung beetles: "amazing bloody things".

Stan likes to lime his paddocks and prefers to spread it on the pasture rather than incorporate it. He says soil tests are a useful tool that gives him information to add to his observation and experience.

"I used to think if I couldn't see what was happening then it wasn't happening," he says.

Following a long history of phosphate fertiliser application he does not see any alternatives - and he has tried them. Stan has not fertilised for the past six years, however, Olsen P levels in the paddocks he has tested are still a healthy 23.

Stan also uses an Agrowplow for lifting and cracking the soil and letting it drop back. When he started it could only get it down 150mm (six inches). Nowadays he is ploughing 360mm (14 inches) deep.

He is convinced that increasing organic matter in the soil is the answer; for Stan high organic matter leads to the right nutrient and soil pH levels.

"Once you do that it all falls into place," he says.

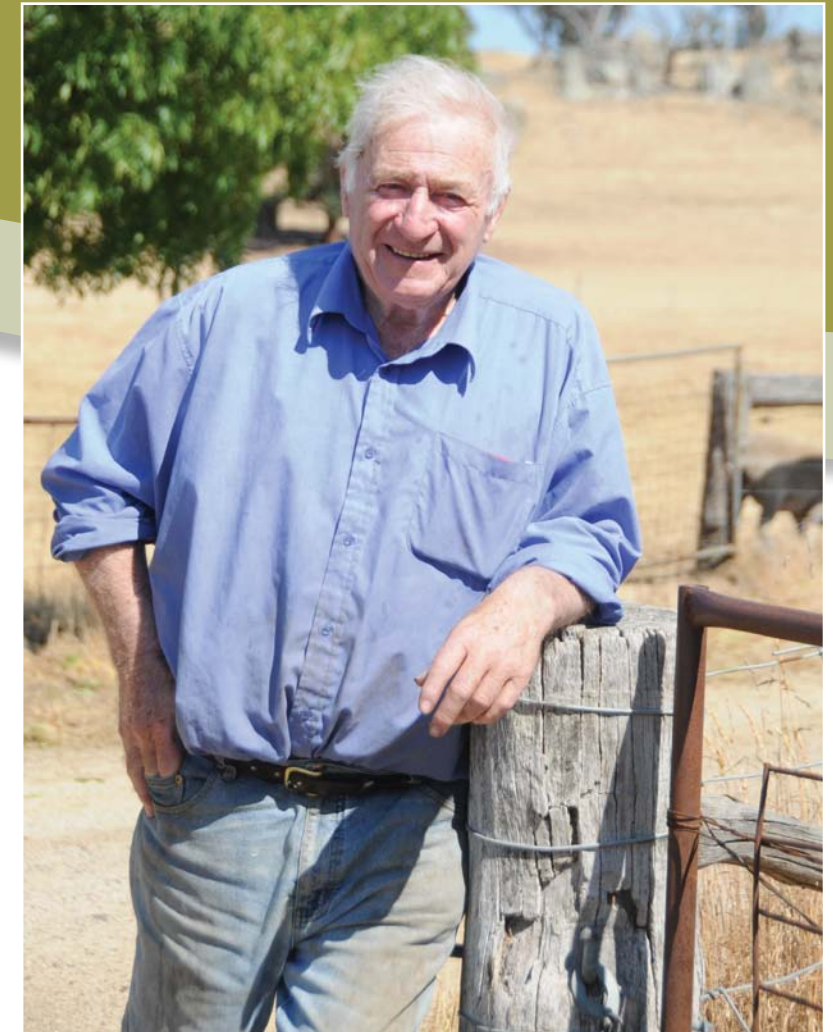
His advice for those wanting to try different things or change management is patience.

"Just take note of what you are doing, do it properly and do it for three years before you make up your mind ... nature will do it for you, but you've got to wait," he says.

Managing the nutrients on his farm means paying attention to "what you are growing, the needs for the soil, the needs for the plant and the needs for the stock". His advice is to not focus on one part of the system because it increases the risk of getting other parts of the system out of balance.

Stan says he is still learning and while he is not sure what a good manager is, it is pretty clear that in his ninth decade Stan retains his love of observing and trying things and learning all the time.

Good habits in anyone.



Stan Artridge at his property in Ruffy



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