



SGLN's Multispecies Coaching Project Farmers Growing Multispecies Pastures

Farmers in South Gippsland are working together to learn how to successfully grow multispecies pastures to benefit their stock, soil health and budget.

They are participants in South Gippsland Landcare Network's Multispecies Coaching Program and include conventional farmers, people new to farming, broadscale commercial farmers and small acreage farmers. This fact sheet tells some of their stories.

Commencing in 2023 workshops were held prior to the spring and autumn planting seasons. The farmers developed personalised plans for trialling multispecies on their farms with help from specialist Jade Killoran (Healthy Farming Systems).

Farm walks were held, along with online meetings in between workshops to ask questions and share results. Through an online chat group farmers also share photos, collaborate on bulk seed purchases, and learn from and support each other.

A second year of funding was secured in 2024, and a new group of farmers joined the program. The diverse group of participants are from beef, dairy and sheep farms, from small properties up to large commercial dairy farms.

Farmers have used a range of approaches from low-intervention through to more intensive preparation, sowing and fertilising.

High intensity approach

Louise Vuillermin runs 375 cows and calves on a 400 acre property near Foster. She grew up on a dairy farm and had a hobby farm before purchasing her current property 10 years ago, where she has farmed with a risk-averse conventional approach.

Louise was struggling with the feed gap in late summer and needing to feed out in waterlogged paddocks in winter. Stock pugging the paddocks leading to uneven ground was another problem. Attending beef group and seeing others who always have a crack at anything, and wanting to be "as good as the blokes or better!" inspired Louise to take what seemed like a risk, and trial multispecies pastures to help address the feed gap.

She hadn't grown multispecies before, needed feed for her stock and couldn't risk a crop failure, so took a high intensity approach. This included spraying herbicide before sowing to reduce competition from existing pasture, using a powerharrow to ensure good seed to soil contact, and fertilising the crop with conventional high analysis fertiliser and lime.

This project is funded by the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority through the Victorian Government's Victorian Landcare Grants.



Farmers Growing Multispecies Pastures

Louise was initially worried about how to feed the crop and wondered if the multispecies might affect stock gut health. Neither of these things ended up being a problem, and Louise has been delighted with the results.



Louise's summer crop exceeding expectations

Louise said “the multispecies filled the feed gap, it was extraordinary”. She has also seen improvements in stock health, they are thriving and significantly healthier with shiny coats, and the death rate of cows and calves has reduced by more than half. They were fat and ready to go through the winter. The fertility rate is also improving. It was also easy to feed stock – just drive the quad bike through to put a temporary electric fence in.

Louise says her soil health is improving, with grasses growing much better and paddocks smoother. “I am much happier when I look at them as well, which improves my mental health”

Having Jade's experience and support helped Louise consider her options, the level of risk she was comfortable with, and make decisions. Louise is learning what works and doesn't work on her country, and will continue using multispecies, working towards a perennial crop as the soil health improves.

From high input approach to trialling alternative fertilisers

Heather Matthies is an ex-dairy farmer who has downsized to her 40ha turnout block near Mirboo North where she now runs beef. Farming for 40 years, Heather used high input conventional fertiliser (400kg/yr of 3:1, urea and NPK, moderately high nitrogen with occasional lime), rotationally grazing moving stock every week to 10 days, with a three to four week rest period.

Following a period of ‘retirement’, Heather returned to farming after her tenant gave up the lease. She was having trouble maintaining the ryegrass and clover pasture, and fertiliser prices were unpredictable and usually expensive, meaning budgets were getting tighter.

Heather noticed increasing government regulation and community concern over fertiliser and diesel use. She wondered if there was a more sustainable and economic way to grow feed for cows and look after the farm health, so began investigating a biological approach.



Heather's multispecies holding up better than conventional pasture in summer

Farmers Growing Multispecies Pastures

Heather was worried about crashing her highly productive system, and didn't want to risk going 'cold turkey' and not using any fertiliser, so she began switching to compost and lime from conventional fertiliser (for equivalent macronutrients), plus strategic use of conventional boosters. For half the area she began trialling alternative biological fertilisers only, such as seaweed and fish emulsions and worm juice, with compost and lime. Three years on, she finds the pasture in the biological areas is hanging on better in a dry summer. Financially the new approach it isn't costing her any more, and when she stops using lime expects it to cost less.

She turned to multispecies crops to improve soil biology and help reduce the need for inputs and fertiliser. Heather trialled direct drilling a few species (e.g. chicory, plantain) but had limited success competing with existing pasture. She joined the program to learn about the full multispecies approach, try different methods, and achieve better economic results.



Heather's stock prefer eating the multispecies crops

In spring 2023 Heather trialled two pasture preparation methods. The crop in the power harrowed area was a great success, while the direct-drilled crop struggled to compete with existing pasture. This reiterated Jade's advice about the importance of adequate pasture preparation, with paddock requirements varying depending on the soil type and paddock history. We used the cultivation calculator as a starting point, <https://www.heytesburylandcare.org.au/>.

She was using rotational grazing before but is now cutting paddocks into smaller blocks and grazing for 1-3 days at a time. Heather has noticed the pastures bounce back quicker with the shorter rotation and longer rest time, and says the cows love the multispecies and prefer it. The soil biology is also improving more quickly in the multispecies areas and the soil is softer with better water infiltration and more life.

Heather is enjoying learning from Jade, says her knowledge base is excellent, and advice about planting crops is spot on and easy to follow. Her goal is to move from annual multispecies crops to permanent perennial pastures with some multispecies components, and she thinks she'll be able to achieve this in 2-3 years.

The crash she was worried about hasn't come about. Heather likes what she's seeing in the paddocks, and will continue to monitor via soil tests, animal production, pasture persistence, grazing recovery and soil visual assessments.

Farmers Growing Multispecies Pastures

Methods for small farms, limited machinery

Sally and Nigel Munday run 43 beef cattle on a small farm on sandy soils near Cape Liptrap. They have owned the farm for 20 years but leased it out and took over management two years ago.

It had been managed conventionally previously, however they were concerned about needing to constantly apply expensive fertiliser, and wanted to investigate an alternative approach.

Sally said "We wanted to improve the farm and make it healthier, and also needed the ledger to be positive to keep the bank happy".

They have limited farm equipment, so started off spreading seed by hand on a bare sandy embankment, with the cattle trampling it in. The seed grew well and led to topsoil sticking rather than washing away which was a great result!

They then purchased a cheap tow along seed spreader and towed it behind the ride on mower to spread the seed for the next crop.

Sally says "I'm a multispecies convert! We now plan to scale up and grow them across the farm. We fertilised our first-year crop with a fish and kelp based fertiliser. That paddock has great root depth, plenty of worms and soft soil that retains moisture. Other traditionally managed paddocks on the farm have shallow roots and no worms in comparison."



Seeder towed behind ride on mower

Different approaches on each farm

Across the project participants come from a diverse range of farms, and everyone's approach is different.

Some are trying innovative approaches including using a drone to sow seed in front of the cows before they enter the paddock, or on hills that are too steep for tractors.

The program has supported all participants to develop a plan specific to their farm (soil type, topography, paddock history, etc.) and the approach they would like to take.

The expert advice from Jade Killoran and support from the other farmers has answered any questions and helped participants feel confident to trial and implement multispecies pastures at their own pace.