

MEET THE MAKER

Science behind boutique vegies

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine spoke to Jocelyn Bathgate about her and husband Andrew's evolution from agricultural scientists to boutique vegetable growers.



Southerly Magazine: How did you and Andrew come to be here?

Jocelyn Bathgate: We came here in 2005. We'd been living over in New South Wales for a few years and we didn't want to go back to living in Perth. We'd worked a bit down here prior to that so we decided it would be a good place to settle with young children. We're both ag scientists. I'm a plant pathologist and Andrew is an agricultural economist. When we moved to here, our youngest child was just starting school so I was out of the workforce and looking after children.

SM: Was this what you had in mind when you decided to move back to WA?

JB: No, this farming was a bit accidental. Andrew had gone into business doing farm consultancy research, so the intention was that he'd base himself here. We weren't intending to farm this, but we gradually got hooked on it and eventually decided that we wanted to do full-time farming. We started off with potatoes. It was very successful for us, selling potatoes locally, because we sell a lot of gourmet potato varieties and that allows us to communicate with our customers about how to use them. We've actually got very well-educated customers at the Albany Farmers Market who know a lot about what to do with potatoes and what the different characteristics of the different varieties. That direct sale way of selling potatoes I think has been really successful.

SM: And you grow and sell seed potatoes?

JB: Yes, we've since got into selling seed potatoes to nurseries. We package them for a couple of different customers so a lot of the seed potatoes that people buy for their gardens come from here.

SM: When did you branch out into other vegetables?

JB: We gradually moved into that when we realised that there wasn't a big enough market for us to just do the potatoes. We started growing other market lines of vegetables. It was sort of "come on a bit of a crazy journey", trying to grow a lot of different vegetables. There wasn't room in our market for us to grow the main varieties, so initially we grew a lot of sidelines that other growers weren't interested in producing, like Asian vegetables.

SM: Did you ever go into value-adding?

JB: We had a pickling business where we made a lot of very nice preserves. Because they were gourmet vegetables that we were growing, we often ended up with a lot of unsold produce. We were growing heritage tomatoes and lots of different sorts of capsicums and chillis, so it was good produce to turn into other things but not really good lines for making a living out of. Now, 10 years later, we've kind of got to a stage where we've unfortunately dropped a lot of our gourmet lines and we've just scaled up

a few main, mainly root vegetables.

SM: What does the produce list look like now?

JB: There's about 10 varieties of potatoes that we cycle through the Farmers Market as well as some seed potatoes. Our focus is still on gourmet vegetables and selling to distributors that supply restaurants. There's things like fancy beetroots, celeriac, fennel and different coloured carrots. They're lines that are popular in the restaurant industry. For local sales we grow things like cauliflowers and broccolini, and there's some vegetables that we just grow now for the Farmers Market, but we do them on a much smaller scale.

SM: The land here is obviously well suited to your crops.

JB: Well that's the thing, the soil in these swamps is lovely for growing vegetables, and we don't have to use a lot of irrigation. We do irrigate in the summer, but not to the extent that we're leeching out the nutrients and having to reapply artificial fertilisers all the time. I think the produce probably grows slower but develops a better flavour because we're not trying to pump through, we're not irrigating and putting on lots of nitrogen and just trying to get big volumes out fast. With things like carrots, our production is very small but we're not trying to compete with the \$1 a kilo supermarket carrots. We produce a really tasty carrot, it's just that we can't grow enough of them really because people love the flavour.

SM: How big is the farm?

JB: Well it's just over 50 acres, but we've got 19 acres of arable land on the swamp, and then at times we have some land that we use on our two neighbouring properties as well at different times of the year. I should say that we're really fortunate that we're farming next to Terry and Julian Ackley because we wouldn't be doing any farming without them because they've been really generous in lending us stuff, giving us lots of advice and help ever since we came here. There's been a lot of sharing of resources and labour that goes both ways.

SM: At one point I recall you were direct marketing with mixed vegetable boxes that you delivered around Albany.

JB: Anyone who does boxed vegetables, good on you. It's such hard work. That would've been getting on for 2008/9 that we were doing that sort of thing. Now I think we've gone in a full circle because we've sort of realised that delivering vegetables to a wholesale market – a lot of produce to one customer – is really the only way that you can make a reasonable amount of money, so we're trying to scale up that part of the business. We're still committed to providing vegetables to the local market, but really you can't make a living out of doing that. It's such a hard industry to make a living in anyway.

SM: Whereabouts do your vegetables



■ Andrew and Jocelyn Bathgate at work on the packing shed.

popularity?

JB: I think in the last 10 years people have been exposed to a lot of new vegetables, and so things like fennel is much more popular than it was. I think restaurants are always looking for things that you're not going to be eating at home. But the trouble with the restaurant industry is they're quite small customers individually, and that's why it's been important to find these distributors who supply lots of restaurants

SM: So apart from ramping up the smart side of wholesaling, what else is there on the horizon for you here?

JB: It's interesting, it's taken 10 years to figure out how to grow vegetables, and that sort of finetuning of how we do things is always happening. It's interesting to look back and see how bad you were at doing it initially, and there's still things we're really awful at doing. The learning curve is quite steep.

SM: Have you ever looked at going down the certified organic route?

JB: We decided we didn't want to become certified organic, but we've always had a philosophy where we've wanted to grow in an environmentally sustainable way and not use a lot of chemical input. The trouble with scaling up is that in the past we could cope with the weeds in small patches of carrots, but now we have to use chemicals for weed control because it's not economically sustainable to have teams of people going out weeding carrots. We do grow some spray-free lines for some organic customers up in Perth.

SM: And that is fairly strict from a biosecurity point of view?

JB: We have a good system where we don't muddle up produce and we make sure that we've got buffers in place to ensure that the produce we're selling as spray-free actually is what we're saying it is. Still, most of our produce doesn't have any chemical sprays that aren't organic, except for carrots and celeriac, things where we have

end up, apart from locally?

JB: Some of them go to the wholesale market at Canning Vale. The ones that end up there might be bought by small retailers. Some of the customers have got market stalls, as there's a lot of farmers markets around Perth now. Some restaurants buy from those places. Then we've got some distributors who supply lots of restaurants, so that's probably our main focus. One of those is down in Margaret River.

SM: Has there been anything on those lines that have surprised you with its



■ A selection of the Bathgate produce which is available at Albany Farmers Market.

to manage the weeds after we've put the crop in. Making sure that we've got a strict system of producing produce that's been well looked after and managed is one of the objectives that we have on the farm.

SM: What would your favourite vegetable be from the farm, or favourite group of vegetables, and how would you prepare them?

JB: My favourite vegetables are probably the Italian salad greens. We've always had a bit of a relationship

with salads on the farm, and those are sort of more of the unusual. The unusual vegetables that we've been reluctant to drop off our list, so the radicchio, endives and those bitter greens. I love salads that have that base. A lot of those vegetables grow very well in the winter. So then, when you're kind of feeling you've had enough of the cold, you can make yourself a nice salad with oranges and radicchio and all those nice things and it kind of makes you feel healthy and reinvigorated after too much stodgy winter food. Those would have to be my favourite things. **S**

