

MEET THE MAKER

Feltons' farm a growing concern

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine travelled to Youngs Siding to speak to vegetable growers Daniel and Simone Felton.

Southerly Magazine: How did you get this start in market gardening?

Daniel Felton: I started growing vegies when I was eight, on Mum and Dad's farm in the Porongurups. I dug up a little patch with a shovel and stuck in some tomatoes. My grandmother brought a big four-litre bucket of tomatoes off me for 50 cents, and I thought I was a millionaire, so that's where it started, 41 years ago.

SM: What sort of farm did your parents have up there?

DF: Just a little cattle hobby farm. Dad was a mission kid, so I guess they were used to making things stretch. He had a vegie garden, and chooks, and all the things you do – a few beef cattle, a few sheep. My grandparents were missionaries in Norseman, so they grew up on a scrap of oily rag. Even though Dad had a good career, he was just used to living like that.

SM: And that lives on through you?

DF: I don't think I could say that with all integrity, having three boats in the driveway.

SM: When did the interest in growing vegetables become a bit more than that?

DF: In 1993 I finished uni at Muresk with an Ag Business degree, and really wasn't sure what to do. I applied for a job at the bank and a chemical company, but because it was around Christmas time everyone was shut down and didn't get onto it. In the meantime I just started doing some

casual work for a local orchardist who was mates with Dad. I really didn't know what to do. I was praying hard about it, and I felt that God was saying "Aim to live simply and work with your hands", so basically, what happened was I leased a bit of land from a local farmer and started a business with virtually no experience. With \$3,000 and a \$10,000 loan, I built 14 little greenhouses and jumped off the deep end.

SM: Was that a bit scary for a young man or were you confident in your ability?

DF: No, it was very stressful. I didn't quite go broke, but I did a good job of it. I made \$24,000 the first year, which wasn't bad going really in those days. Then the next year it was considerably less and then I did other things. I went into managing a vineyard and I worked at the Ag College for two-and-a-half years. I went back to University and did a Diploma of Education and then taught remotely in the Kimberley for four years. That's when we bought this place. We bought it sight unseen. My mate across the road said: "This is where you can have your shed and grow your vegies." I just laughed and said; "Mate, don't be silly. I'm never doing that again; there's no money in that." I had no intention of doing it.

SM: What was your intention?

DF: Well, it was 40 acres. It was only \$50,000, no more than a little house in Denmark at that stage, so it was just a little place to run a few cows and live.



That was the intention. After teaching at NASHS for a year when I came back from the Kimberley I heard the Ag College was chasing a chaplain, which is something I'd thought about doing. Long story short, I ended up there. It was about \$20 an hour, 20 hours a week, so I was doing five part-time jobs plus the chaplain thing. And so, again, we started the business. I think we had about \$3,000, no packing shed, no machinery shed, no dams, just a little house dam and a couple of little cattle dams.

SM: What did you grow first up?

DF: We just started from scratch again and did some zucchinis and squash. In the first year we turned over \$22,000. We didn't own a tractor that worked for three years and had no cool room for three years. We'd go and pick before going off to one job, run it down to my mates' coolroom, go off to that job, come home, have a shower, go to the next job. Then, when we wanted to pack it, go and grab it from my mate's coolroom, pack it, then take it back to my mates' coolroom. Then the truck

would come, so we'd go and pick it up and take it to another property where the truck would come and pick it up. That's how it started. And then we got into the Farmers Market about a year in, so that gave us a good opportunity to get going. So, that's what we did, but yeah, it's been hard. Simone reminds me of that second year when there was about three weeks in a row that we worked until 2.30am on a Friday morning and got up at 5.30am to go to the Farmers Market.

SM: At what point in the evolution did all the other part-time jobs get set aside?

DF: I did four years of chaplaincy, and then we were going to go and do volunteer work in Africa. So, I quit the chaplaincy to try and get this place up to speed to be saleable. Then the Africa plan fell through and this basically became my full-time income in about 2012.

SM: Do you miss teaching?

DF: I like teaching, but I don't like paperwork, so sometimes I feel guilty



■ Daniel and Simone Felton have grown a substantial enterprise at Youngs Siding.

for doing this, because I think it's important to have good role models in the classroom. I do like kids and I do care about kids, but I just don't like paperwork, and also I like going fishing during the week. You can't say to the principal "Oh, it's good weather on Wednesday, so I'm going fishing", but when you work for yourself you can do it.

SM: Where are you at today in terms of the varieties of vegetables that you grow?

DF: We grow three kinds of watermelons, but only on a small scale,

for local. We grow rockmelons, again just for the local Farmers Market. We grow four different types of tomatoes, cucumbers, three different types of eggplant, four different kinds of beans, garlics, leeks, two different kinds of parsley, brussel sprouts, broccoli, cauliflower, chillis, two different kinds of paprika, three different kinds of capsicum, strawberries, sugar peas, snow peas, shelling peas, two different kinds of onions and silverbeet. We did a little bit of corn for the first time this year, plus there's spring onions, a bit of beetroot, squash and zucchinis.

SM: What are the factors that make you decide to grow a certain variety?

DF: There's certain things I can't make money out of, so I swear I'll never grow them again, and then every three years I'll give them another go, like an idiot. Like corn – I didn't think it would be particularly profitable, but I just did a few to have a bit of a play. I did know that it wouldn't be profitable because you've got to be mechanised and have economies of scale, but we planted it all by hand really early because I knew I'd be the first bloke to market with them when you've got no competition. I didn't say I was smart, I just work hard.

SM: So, of the 40-acre block how much have you got planted?

DF: Well, it varies from season to season. This year's a particularly big season. I'd have to measure it up, which I've never done, but I would have thought there's probably 20 acres planted. There's about 200,000 plants.

SM: From an agronomy point of view, how do you manage the soil?

DF: I reckon this year we'd be putting on 12 tonne of Dynamic Lifter, which is composted chicken manure. In winter, if the land's not being used, I'll grow as many weeds as thick and as high as I can and then I'll turn them in to add organic matter. Apart from that I'll add plenty of lime. The only crop on that list that has had any spray on it at all is the strawberries, which have been sprayed twice. Everything else is totally spray-free. The early crop of tomatoes will often get a spray, but they didn't this year.

SM: To be as spray-free as possible is a deliberate decision?

DF: A lot of the time it is deliberate. Most of the time I don't want to do it at all. The only time I'll do it is if you're going to lose a crop. This year I didn't do it and I lost some crops, but, it's a particularly big year this year, so with that many balls up in the air, you just think which egg can I drop and break that's going to cost me the least? So I just let it go, basically. It's a pretty dynamic model when you've got that many different crops, even though they're only small in scale, there's a lot of them, so there's a lot going on.

SM: What staff numbers do you need to make it all work?

DF: In winter, none. At the moment I've got five casuals and I've got two other local lads who have worked for me on and off for a number of years who have given me between one and three days a week. They've got other interests

and other incomes, but they're just fantastic. They have a good work ethic, and are just switched on. They're worth their weight in gold and we couldn't do it without them. It's hard because a lot of the casuals who are actually capable of farm work have English as their second language, so communication can be a great challenge.

SM: How did the COVID outbreak affect you?

DF: In the first couple of weeks we lost \$10,000 because the market for our second-grade capsicums collapsed because the restaurants were closed. Then over the next three to four weeks, because everyone was in the supermarkets panic buying toilet paper, it just created a spike in the market for fresh veg. People were eating better and cooking their own. So we lost \$10,000 in the first two weeks and then made \$30,000 more over the next four weeks, so overall we were \$20,000 better off. That's my back-of-the-envelope maths. Then we lost three backpackers before the end of the season – all wanting to get home because of COVID. Normally I'll put an ad on for 24 hours for casuals and I'll get 30 applications from about 60 people, because there's multiples in one application. This year it would take a week to get the same number of applications. You get some pretty random applications, whereas before there'd be backpackers from here to the horizon lined up.

SM: Does the wide variety of vegetables make it more difficult to train staff?

DF: It's a lot more complicated. Some growers are picking one crop and packing one crop. I'm picking 20 crops and packing 20 crops. This morning, the four ladies I've got picked two different kinds of paprika, two different kinds of capsicum, chillis, and this afternoon they're picking tomatoes and beans, so that's eight different crops they're picking today, and they've been packing as well. It's all pretty repetitive once you have an eye for it, but it's still more than one thing.

SM: In the annual cycle of things, when do you get a break?

DF: For the first three years we didn't get a lot at all. Couldn't have afforded it, even if we had the time, simple as that. In the last six to eight years we've gone away for two to three weeks to Kalbarri, Shark Bay and Carnarvon.

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Last year we went for a month.

SM: What's the plan for the future? Do you think, as it stands right now, it's reached a capacity where you don't want to push the envelope any further?

DF: Actually, I want to cut back 30 per cent. Every five years we've done a big year. It's just sort of happened that way. I thought I'm still supposedly young enough to do it, I had some good workers from last year who are coming back and I thought, "We'll have a big year". It was a mistake, but once you spend \$60,000 on seedlings, which is what I spent, you're committed. You just have to make the best of a bad situation, but definitely I'm going to cut back 30 per cent next year. I never want to do this again. It's easy to think "Oh, but I've got some good casual labourers", but there's so many things that only I can do. And the nature of the property is that the water's not automatic. Some people on a well-established, big farm can just use their mobile to do all their fertigation and water, whereas I'm using firefighting pumps, watering at about 14 different blocks and fertilising. It's all manual, so the demands on my time just go up and I can't do more than what I am. I honestly believe that if I do 30 less but really well, I will probably yield nearly as much, because when you have that much in the ground, you just don't get the results if you're not on top of it. I think we're at the stage that I want to do less, not more, but do it better.

SM: What do you suppose that will look like? Cut down on the varieties or plant less of them?

DF: There's certain things I said I'll grow every three years, and I don't really make anything out of them. So I'll say I'll never grow that again, and then a few



■ Beans and capsicums are just two of the varieties cropping heavily at present on Daniel and Simone Felton's farm.

years later I think "I'll grow a little bit of that because no one's doing that at the Farmers Market". I just have to be more disciplined and more decisive.

SM: What are some of the interesting places that you know your produce ends up?

DF: We send probably 80 per cent of our produce on average to Perth markets at Canning Vale.

SM: Have you seen at the Farmers Market a change in people's attitude towards food production since COVID?

DF: I think it's been over the last three or four years that there's a lot more preparedness to support local. People were very much price conscious, and they still are, and that's perfectly legitimate, but I think that more and more people are community-minded

and they just realise that if you help a local you're helping yourself. I just think that there is a lot more of a tendency to support local small businesses, which is great because we couldn't have done what we've done without the Farmers Market. It's a modest but significant part of our business, and I just wouldn't have been able to do it without them, as simple as that. You cut out the middleman.

SM: Do you enjoy talking to the people who wander through?

DF: Absolutely. Unfortunately, when we've got the most amount of stuff to sell at the Farmers Market and you're working 75 hours a week and I'm under quite a lot of pressure, so I don't get full value out of it at that time of the year. I'll often have to leave and drive the truck in early and, if it's hot weather I've got to come back and irrigate or do weeds or do one of a hundred things that I'm behind on that I can't really do well during the week because I'm organising workers and working with them. So yes, it's pretty full-on at this time of the year. Provided I get enough sleep I manage alright, but it's a bit more challenging when you get one of 1,000 customers who can be a bit curly. If I've had enough sleep I'm pretty reasonable, but as I get older I find I don't suffer fools quite as easily.

SM: Tell us about your sauce tomatoes. They seem to have become a little bit of a phenomenon for you.

DF: Well, firstly you don't grow tomatoes for sauce to make money. But because we used to be the only

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■ Daniel Felton's amongst an impressive crop of kent pumpkins on his Youngs Siding farm.



people growing tomatoes in the Farmers Market, the last thing we wanted to do was not have enough. It was in my interest to make sure I always had enough because I didn't want three people all trying to sell tomatoes, because obviously you still have all the hassles of trying to grow a different crop and

managing it. But you've only got 30 per cent of the sales, that was a bit pointless, so I wanted to make sure I had the market adequately supplied. Part of that was always growing more than what you needed. An intelligent person would've grown 10 per cent more than what they needed, but often I would grow

way more. One year I ploughed 2,000 kilograms of tomatoes, so we used to sell them very cheaply instead. They're still cheap now, but I realised if you're not covering the cost of your labour to grow them and harvest them, it's absolutely pointless. There's certain families, particularly the Italian ones, who love making their pasta sauce and they're happy with the product, and so I've got at least half a dozen different customers now who need 200 kilograms or more a year. I'm still trying to get away from the trap of growing too much because while it should be cheap to grow crops, now it's expensive. The fertigation fertiliser that I use is costing me \$60 for 25 kilograms, so a pallet of that fertiliser there is \$2,800, for one pallet. This year I'll go through \$20,000 worth of fertiliser on 40 acres. It's enormous. So, you don't want to be growing crops that you're not selling, so I'm trying to cut back on my tomatoes. At the same time, it has become a bit of a cult thing with some people, and you still want to keep them happy, so it's a bit of a fine line but it's part of the whole picture.

SM: At this point I ask, if you had one choice, one last meal, what meal would you have using your own produce and how would it be prepared?

DF: I love meat so I'm in trouble here. I actually like a good watermelon. In the summertime, it's nothing for me to just eat half a watermelon at morning tea time and half at lunch time if it's warm weather. That's without overthinking it but I'll eat a watermelon a day this time of year, so it's pretty simple. I could come up with something really fancy, like I do a dhufish-type stir fry kind of thing, that we caught the dhufish and it had tomatoes, it had everything under the sun, and that's nice too, but for simplicity I'd just go a watermelon. I've always liked them since I was a kid.

SM: For all the hard work, you must still derive a lot of satisfaction from producing good products?

DF: I do like to see a good crop and you do get satisfaction from it, but you don't get to dwell on it for long. This is not an easy business to be in because it's quite stressful. Mind you, everything is stressful, and if I were still teaching that would be stressful. That's the modern world. Most people probably feel they are doing 20 per cent more than what they want to be doing. The positives are that I get to spend much more time with the kids than if I was working off the farm. Even though I work longer hours than any other job I might have done, I'm in and out of the house all day, so that's one advantage.

SM: And the boats parked outside are patient?

DF: Well, that's the other advantage. I haven't been out fishing for months but we're taking the truck in on Saturday morning and will launch the boat after that because I've got a worker who can help out at the Farmers Markets. **S**

fresh from the farmer

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