

MEET THE MAKER

Clean, green products are a family affair for Mosterts

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, WAYNE HARRINGTON speaks to Dirk and Harma Mostert about their thriving horticultural business between Albany and Denmark.



Wayne Harrington: Tell us about how you came to be involved in agriculture.

Harma Mostert: I grew up in Albany on about three-and-a-half acres my parents had. I lived there my whole life actually until I got married to Dirk and we moved out to a dairy farm in Redmond. His is from a dairy farming family, and his brother and his sister still have the farm out in Redmond. We bought a place in Youngs Siding where we were just growing beef, but it wasn't making us enough money. Dirk was working for Phillip and Sheila Marshall who were our neighbours and they were growing asparagus. So he got the idea from Phillip to grow asparagus, which would boost our income.

WH: Did that prove to be a good fit with what you were already doing?

HM: Asparagus is not a thing that you have to pick all year round. It's seasonal. So we figured that would supplement our income out there. So we started growing that, but even that was quite difficult. I guess in some ways it was difficult to make ends meet and we knew we had to get some other stream of income. So we spent 20 years driving up and down this highway here and saw Howard Shapland had it on on the market for quite a while. We didn't really take much notice, you know, you drive up and down, see the "For Sale" sign and you'd carry on. Dirk came here to buy some irrigation pipes and he got talking to Howard. Somehow we got talking about what it would be like to

grow vegetables and, because we'd been talking about thinking outside of the square, we kept talking to them. We met up quite a few times and talked about what they grew here and what was involved. We realised the potential of this place because there's just so much water. It's great soil for growing veggies. So we asked them if we could lease it for two years with them mentoring us.

WH: Did their help make the move more manageable for you both?

HM: I was so excited because they were just going to sell it as a farm, not the veggie side because no one was interested. And so they helped us with everything and taught us everything that we do here. Bev taught me all the hydroponic stuff and Howard helped with all the outside vegetables. He still does. He mentored us through the growing to the marketing. They gave us all the contacts for restaurants and IGA and whoever else they used to sell to. We got their spot at the Farmers Market. We couldn't have done it without them. They set off once we sort of took over, but yes, they're still involved. If we have any questions. We ask them. They come up for coffee the other day, and you know how to drive around and they're just so happy that somebody's carrying on with what they started – what their dream had been.

WH: And that's not always the way when people take over property or a business is it?



HM: No, not always, and which is fair enough, because you've got to have your own vision right? And not everyone's vision is the same. In this case, we knew Howard had been doing it for so many years and we weren't vegetable growers.

Dirk Mostert: Bev was saying this variety and that variety of lettuce or herbs and whatever, but Harma had no idea what she was talking about, and we'd come away with our heads spinning, so they taught us everything.

WH: What was that like for you as a cattle farmer, making that transition to almost full horticulture?

DM: We'd been growing asparagus for 15 years or so already and Phillip and Sheila really got us going. And so same thing again here. Their son Bruce has helped us along as well. It's been really good.

WH: What things have changed or what have you introduced in terms of new varieties in your time here?

DM: They didn't do asparagus here, so we went into the asparagus again. We've got one-and-a-half hectares here down from four-and-a-half from the original place.

WH: Any any thoughts of integrating more?

DM: Not really because if you do too much you tend to lose focus on the good stuff. That's what we found. The world is our oyster because we've still got that much water you could grow anything you like, but now we're going to focus on the main things – and that's still a lot.

WH: What are the main things for you?

DM: Veggies are the main thing but



■ Harma, Dirk and Danni Mostert amongst the rows of brassicas at the family farm between Albany and Denmark.

I'm at heart still a cattle farmer. If we manage to pay the bill off I'd love to focus on my cows again. I love sitting out in the paddock with the cows and Harma loves the hydro. Outside, the main things are broccoli, cabbage, asparagus, kale, sweetcorn, garlic and onions.

WH: So what have you got happening in the hydro?

HM: Mainly lettuce. I do three different varieties of lettuce. Red and green oak leaf, frizzy lettuce and cos lettuce. And then I do herbs, so spinach, coriander, basil, pak choi, mustard and lots of leafy greens. I use them for salad mixes for the Farmers Markets. Some

restaurants we also do mixes for. And otherwise we sell it all as bunches at the Farmers Markets and also to the IGAs. We supply North Road IGA and then the two IGA is in Denmark, and then probably about 10 different restaurants around Albany and AVEG.

WH: Have you ever wholesaled into Perth?

DM: No, we want to keep control of our produce. As soon as it leaves that gate, you don't have any control over it. And you cut out the middleman. They straightaway take their 15

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Welcome
TO THE
Mostert's
Farm



per cent, sometimes up to 19 per cent. And the cost of freight is a killer.

WH: As it stands right now, you can sell everything you produce locally without having to go down that path?

DM: We can produce more, but we still can't produce enough.

WH: So you're in a great position?

DM: Yes, we have potential to grow, and that's on the horizon to have another sort of outlet on the other side of Albany. That's what I want to do, but the problem is the workforce and quality of life. You want to have your day off here and there. Sundays are always our days off.

WH: How does a working week look, starting from Sunday and you've had the Farmers Market on Saturday?

DM: Sunday's our church day. I mean, I still have to do the watering and all the necessary stuff. Monday is picking broccoli. We pick broccoli twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays. And that's also getting orders ready. Tuesday is deliveries into town and getting orders ready. Wednesday is a quiet day, so that's the day where, if we want to have a few hours off, then that's when we catch up on our maintenance. Friday we're getting ready for the Markets again. If there's any time off, it's generally a Saturday afternoon when we can sit on the couch and have a snooze.

WH: How does the Farmers Market day start for you?

DM: The alarm clock goes off at five o'clock. And then we drive out the gate at six o'clock. We load the truck up between five and six. Check all the hydro, drive into the Farmers Market and set up for that. We generally finish setting up at about half-seven – quarter past seven – so we can sort of wander around the Market ourselves and talk to the other guys. And then we're back. I'm at a market from eight to 12 and I'm back home at one o'clock, unload the truck and sit back and relax. Do some housework. It just depends how you feeling because we still go out if we feel and up to it, and I still go and do some watering. I like tractor work as well, so in my downtime I like sitting on a rotary hoe.

WH: What does the annual cycle look like?



■ Harma, Danni and Dirk and Mostert take great pride in the quality of their asparagus.

DM: It slows down over winter, sort of May June, July, it slows down. And then it starts to pick up. Asparagus kicks in by mid-August to September and then that kicks in through to Christmas time. Then it starts to ramp up over summer. That's when things really grow. We start harvesting in January for corn and can go as long as we can – April or May.

WH: The hydro has its own annual cycle as well?

HM: It does, but really the only thing that I don't do all year round is basil, because basil doesn't like the winter. But otherwise everything just keeps growing. I drop my orders or my plantings of everything over winter because people are just ordering less stuff. Restaurants shut down or they go quiet. There's not as many visitors in town. And IGAs order less because people aren't eating as many salads and salad mixes. And everything takes a lot longer to grow. In summer from getting seedlings to having a lettuce set at harvest stage can be four

weeks, but in winter it can be eight. So everything takes a lot longer to grow. So we need to grow less because, I mean, you would run out of room because everything's in the system for longer. Otherwise, the hydroponic products is pretty much stable all year. It's not really seasonal.

WH: So apart from you two, how many people have you got working here?

HM: We have our daughter, Danni. She works pretty much full-time and we have our son Clint who comes a couple hours two days a week. Our son Brad comes in a couple of days a week as well. A new guy starting, Bryce, he's coming two days a week and another guy Michael, who does a couple mornings a week. My friend Louise does one day a week and our niece Janel does half a day. Certain days it suits us to have help, so that works for us. And if the other guys can just do part-time it's really good for us because then we can get maximum benefit of their help on the days where we need it and we're not scratching around trying

to find jobs for them do.

WH: What did COVID look like for your operations here?

HM: In some ways that had great benefits because people were eating really healthy. So they ate a lot of veggies. Sometimes the prices were not in the market, but we kept that stable the whole way. We didn't fluctuate in price, but sometimes the prices of stuff when sky-high, which was great. Our overheads went through the roof, though, which wasn't great for the bottom line.

DM: The Markets were really good. People really supported that. We really felt the support of the local community. They were willing to wait and to line up, with all the social distancing. But in regards to going through the Markets, we didn't notice a decrease at all. The regulars really supported, us did the general community.

WH: It's been interesting how COVID has affected people's thinking in Western Australia and became more

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interested in local produce, how it was being grown and where it came from.

DM: And that's where it's benefited us, because often we can talk to the people with confidence about how we grew the plant. So the buck stops with us, so to speak. So when you get a something in the supermarket you don't know the journey that plant's been on. At the Farmers Market produce is generally less than 24 hours old. It's been picked the day before and it's right there. In food-miles it's only 25km.

WH: People are still being surprised if they buy broccoli from you how long it stays fresh in the fridge?

DM: Yes, but especially the lettuce mixes. People are surprised that they last two weeks in the fridge.

WH: Obviously with a lot of vegetables coming off the land, that would require a fair amount of soil management. What does that look like for you?

DM: Looking at the ground! See what the ground is doing and working with the agronomists. We've struggled the last few months with the broccoli. The broccoli has not grown at all and I thought I must have been doing something wrong. I had the agronomist come past two days ago and he said that the people in Manji were having the same trouble with the same variety of broccoli that we're growing. The real wet, cold, windy winter we're having has really affected the broccoli that I'm growing. I hate using sprays and chemicals but I know that I can't do without them for weed and insect control. That's why you sometimes might see a bit of insect damage



■ Danni Mostert enjoys working on the farm alongside her brothers and cousin.

because I just hold off for as long as I can until I'm forced to use chemicals. If you could see what moths do especially in the brassicas, they just destroy it. And you can't farm without it. You can try and build up the soil and build up the plant to make the plant stronger so it can resist or better handle an invasion. That's what we're trying to do here as well, using a lot

of organics like chook manure and building up the soil in that regard. And that helps the plant as well to withstand that. You get a better product, but it also helps them withstand the attack from an insect or any other bugs around. And then with weed control, I do a lot of just mechanical weeding there with cultivating – up and down the row every other week or so. By the

time the weeds get out of hand, you've already picked that crop, so then it just gets ploughed back into the ground. We're using the cows as well, building the soil up. We bring the cows up to a certain area, it goes through the cow and builds the soil up that way. Comparing the hydro and the outside veggies, you're a lot more affected by the elements outside. With the hydros, you got a lot more control over it in regards to the chemicals or fertilisers that you put in there.

WH: Harma, from the hydro point of view, was it interesting for you to have to then start learning about the whole chemistry of the process?

HM: It was, yes. And just knowing what kind of mixture of fertilisers works together to make what it needs. And again, that was something that we learned from Howard and Bev – how they've perfected it over the years. We make our own mixes up from their recipe, I guess you could call it. And it seems to work. But yes, it is interesting and I'm still learning. So if there's something going on in the hydro, it's not like I can say, "Oh, well, that's deficient in phosphorus or whatever". I'm still not quite getting that, but we have a lot of help from our agronomist.

WH: To that end, are you protective about the commercial sensitivity of that IP you've learned about and the knowledge that you now have about the whole chemistry of it all?

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HM: Yes, I would be reluctant to pass on what we use, just because it's not our creation. At the same time, if anyone wants to Google what to put in a hydroponic set-up, it's really pretty much what we would use. I haven't changed a lot I guess because sometimes the fertilisers change and their chemical levels of certain things in there change, so you've got to kind of adjust them. I guess you could call it protective.

WH: As for the future. How would you like to see things evolve?

HM: We differ on this. Dirk would like to expand but I'm not keen. We've actually had people come and ask if we could grow lettuce for Perth because they just love the product from here. But for us, it's not worth it with the freight. Lettuce is not a high-value product, and freight is a killer. For me, I love it, but I'm pretty much at my limit of how much time I want to spend out there because I also want to, you know, go and spend some time in the garden or go out for coffee every now and again with a friend or sit down and read a book. So for me, I'm pretty happy with how things are going. Every now and again we pick up a new customer, so it's not like we're not growing at all.

WH: Do you feel you've found the "sweet spot" in the engine where you're travelling at your optimum efficiency?

HM: Yes, I think so. And I really love working with our children. We never thought we would have this opportunity

■ Harma Mostert has taken charge of the hydroponic side of the family enterprise.



to work with our kids. And our daughter moved down from Perth a couple years ago and she started working for us and we work so well together. It's great.

Our son was working for us full-time, but he went back to carpentry just because we can't compete with tradie wages. And he's getting married and he needs to build his own life. And as much as he loves it here and as much as we love having him here, it's not always possible. Into the future, we've still got a few years in us. We're not ready to retire yet, but eventually we would hope that the kids would keep going with it.

WH: And that would allow someone to spend more time with his cattle?

DM: Definitely! Now that's the thing. My first love has always been cows. Harma wouldn't have agreed to buying this place and selling the other place if it had no cows. I've got 35 head and I want to increase it to 40 on what's probably about 23 hectares which is a fairly high stocking rate. And there's

still a lot more I can do with that. That's what I want to chase. I really want to focus on growing a really top-notch product. I mean we've got a good product now, but I want to improve on it. With the family, we were picking asparagus the other day and it was a real family affair because mum and dad and three of the kids were there and we were having a good old time. We've always done that with the kids and it has been a big part of their growing up – even in the other farm they were always out there helping us. The kids have been a really big part of it.

WH: A question we ask everyone is that if you could choose one dish to enjoy, featuring your own produce, What would it be?

DM: I think mine's actually different because I like steak a lot more than

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■ Dirk Mostert is very much at home with his small herd of cattle.

what Harma does. It would be steak with asparagus and sweet corn. That would be my choice. With garlic butter on the sweet corn in the microwave, or on the barbecue. It doesn't really matter. And the asparagus, when you've got a medium-rare steak – when it's nearly done – throw the asparagus on top and then just cook it a little bit. That's my go-to.

WH: And Harma, what's your choice?

HM: So much to choose from what we grow. I love the spinach and put it in everything but I also love the salads. There's nothing nicer than if you've got a bit of leftover chicken or steak from the night before, throw it in through your salad with a bit of dressing. Perfect.

WH: What sort of dressing is the favourite of a salad producer? Surely you must have the ultimate salad dressing?

HM: Not really, most of the time that comes out the bottle! I don't spend a lot of time in the kitchen.

WH: You probably don't need to put a lot of products on your produce.

DM: Not on the salads, no. Occasionally you might drizzle some Uncle Jeff's on there.

HM: We like the marinated feta and so then often it will just be like the marinade. Or a Caesar salad dressing. Which is fine.

DM: Coming out of winter, and you've been picking asparagus on a wet winter's day and you want a quick lunch, Harma makes a beautiful asparagus soup.

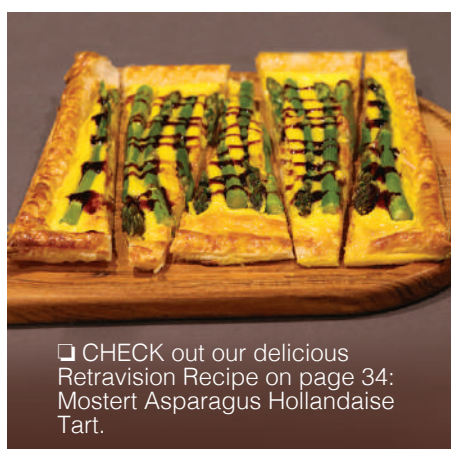
WH: Obviously you love what you do, otherwise you wouldn't be here, but what's the best part? What brings you the most joy?

DM: Steak with asparagus. That's the best part.

WH: I thought you might say something profound, like the joy you bring to customers.

DM: That too. But that's the thing, I really enjoy going to the Farmers Market. The best part is having a good product that people love. And every time – again and again – our reward at a Farmers Market is how people love our products. They'll say, "They're so beautiful and they go with the beautiful people that you are. You're always so happy and you're always so joyful selling your stuff." And that's really it – so many people enjoying our products.

HM: I was going to say something similar. And also, you get it from restaurants and other people as well. But you've got that face-to-face contact with people at the Markets and there's so many loyal customers out there. We were not involved in the Farmers Market until we started here. And in the middle of winter, it's raining, and they're still coming. And they're like, "No, we know you're here selling so we're going to come too." It's just amazing. So many beautiful people out there and such a big following in Albany for the Farmers Markets buying fresh locally produce. It really gives us a kick. It makes it worth getting up at five o'clock every Saturday morning. I thought by now after more than three years I'd sort of be like, "Five in the morning again? I just want to sleep in." But it's just really worth it, worth going down and it's a big part of our income as well. But yes, because it's just got a good vibe and it makes you happy. **S**



□ CHECK out our delicious Retravision Recipe on page 34: Mostert Asparagus Hollandaise Tart.

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RETRAVISION RECIPE



Mostert's Farm Asparagus Hollandaise Tart

SHOPPING LIST

- 10-12 Mostert asparagus spears
- 200ml Hollandaise sauce
- 1 egg
- 1 24cm x 24cm sheet puff pastry
- Balsamic glaze to serve

Preparation time: 10 minutes

Cooking time: 40 minutes

Serves: 4-6

ASPARAGUS season is in full swing on the South Coast, so now is the perfect time to seek out some sweet green spears from local producers like Mostert's Farm and make this great party starter or light lunch dish – Asparagus Hollandaise Tart.

1) Preheat the oven to 200°C (180°C if fan-forced). Place a sheet of puff pastry on a sheet of baking paper in a baking tray. Lightly score a 2cm border around the rectangle, taking care not to cut right through the pastry. Prick well with a fork inside the border. Beat the egg and brush a little over the border of the pastry. Chill pastry in the fridge for 15min.

2) Bake the pastry for 15-20 minutes or until it is golden and puffed up. Remove from oven and gently press the central area down with a spoon, ensuring

the pastry maintains a high border.

3) Turn oven up to 220°C (200°C fan-forced).

4) In a bowl, whisk together the hollandaise sauce with the remaining egg. Spread the hollandaise mixture over the pastry case inside the central area and place the asparagus spears in alternate directions across the pastry.

5) Bake in the oven for 15-20 minutes until the asparagus is roasted and the hollandaise has a golden brulée appearance.

Serve with a drizzle of balsamic glaze. We served our tart on a teak platter from the Ladelle "Otway" range available at Albay Retravisión.

Enjoy! **S**

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