

## MEET THE MAKER

# Accidental orchardists find jewels

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine travelled to Porongurup to speak to pomegranate growers Rob Sutton and Debbie Walker.

**Southerly Magazine:** How long have you been here, at this property?

**Debbie Walker:** We moved out here in 2010.

**Rob Sutton:** Debbie was brought up on a farm. I was in town. Debbie's daughter was into horses and she spotted this property for sale and made an arrangement to come and have a look. Then Debbie came and had a look. I wasn't interested in leaving my house in Burt Street. Anyway, I decided – to demonstrate my commitment to the relationship – to come and have a look. No intention of buying it, but that's how we ended up with it.

**DW:** All the way back into town that day I just didn't say a word. I zipped it because this man won't do anything he doesn't want to. I really liked the property, coming in from a farming background. In town, what do you do? Hang your washing out, mow the lawn, then go and eat?

**SM:** Did it take long to make the shift once you'd decided to turn your life upside down?

**RS:** Deb sold her house quite quickly, but after coming out here for a couple of

weeks, I said 'I'm not going back into town'. I rented my house out for a while and then, three or four years ago, sold it. And I love it here. Absolutely love it.

**SM:** Debbie, the whole pomegranate venture stemmed from a traumatic personal experience for you, didn't it?

**DW:** My cancer diagnosis was on Christmas Eve 2013, so I didn't know what was ahead, just had to take it one step at a time. My niece came down and she said to us, "you've got to get these into your diet". And they were pomegranates. I'd seen them, never knew what they were, so that's where our education started. When I was ill and going through my treatment, Robbie kept busy researching pomegranates. I think that's the way he coped. In that time he was really quite astounded at what he discovered.

**RS:** I went into Woolies after Christmas and found they were all grown in the USA. I was ignorant to the fact of the northern/southern hemisphere ripening times. And there's no information about growing them because no one was



■ Deb Walker and Rob Sutton feel very much at home in their pomegranate orchard.

growing them in any great numbers in WA at that time.

**SM:** When is the harvesting season in WA?

**DW:** Everyone thinks that pomegranates are a summer fruit, because of where they traditionally came from in the Middle East, but they're an autumn fruit.

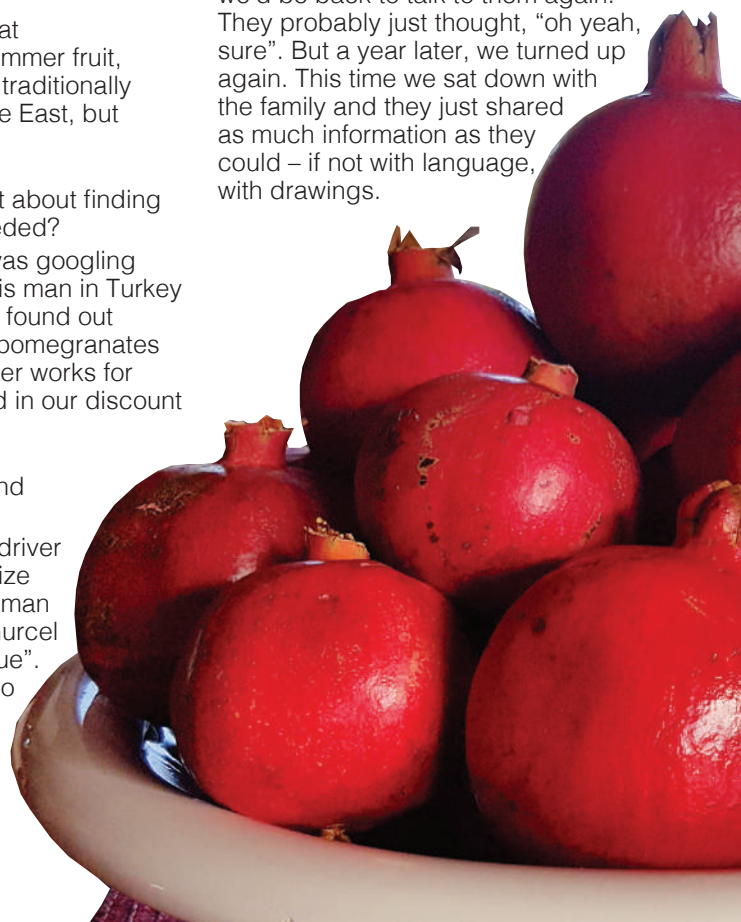
**SM:** So how did you set about finding the information you needed?

**DW:** One day Robbie was googling and he came across this man in Turkey with an orchard and he found out how big a producer of pomegranates Turkey was. My daughter works for Emirates, so we cashed in our discount and went to Turkey.

**SM:** So you just went and knocked on his door?

**JW:** We asked the taxi driver in this town about the size of Mt Barker about this man and he said, "Oh yes, Gurcel is down near the Mosque". So we found Gurcel who Robbie was reading about and arranged to meet him. To them, we were just another pair

of tourists, but we asked them about everything and, through a bit of pigeon English, we said we were trying to do the same thing in Australia. We said we'd be back to talk to them again. They probably just thought, "oh yeah, sure". But a year later, we turned up again. This time we sat down with the family and they just shared as much information as they could – if not with language, with drawings.







**SM:** Were they generous with their knowledge?

**RS:** Absolutely brilliant. It's a really good relationship. We're hoping that they'll come out here when we do the opening of our café. It would be a real honour for us because they shared so much and really gave us the confidence and the ideas.

**SM:** How did the first plantings take shape?

**RS:** I couldn't get much information but I finally found Lewis Horticulture in South

Australia which supplies the trees of all different types. They said we needed 300 minimum, but I think in that first shipment we got 900. However, I was impatient and I put in 500 or 600 of a variety called Mollar de Elche I found in a nursery in Perth. They grew well but have bugger-all fruit on them so we'll probably get rid of them.

**SM:** From there, you've got other varieties?

**RS:** We've got the latest variety called Wonderful, which was bred to produce a good combination of sweet, tart fruit, good lasting, good production, pretty hardy, travel well and keep well. We've probably got a couple of thousand of those now. In total we have six varieties, but there's well over 600 varieties as a base, and then all the derivatives thereafter.

**SM:** How many trees do you have now?

**RS:** I think a touch under 5,000. We've got another 900 coming at Christmas of a variety which is earlier ripening, sweeter and softer seed.

**SM:** Will the numbers level out at about 6,000?

**JW:** I thought it was going to level out at 2,000, but you've got to have supply. You can't afford to sell all your fruit and then go and buy pomegranates and then re-juice them to make your product. The winery is experimenting with our wine at the moment and there is going to be about a 30 per cent loss in our volume to do that.

**SM:** I understand you re-homed some mature trees recently?

**RS:** We did a deal with a man from Goomalling to buy his infrastructure, pipes and trees. There were about 3,500 trees. We had the theory of digging them up, loading them on the truck, bringing them down here, pruning them and planting them. We thought we'd get 2,000 plants on the semi, but only loaded 500.

**SM:** I take it this was pretty hard work.

**RS:** It was hard work getting them on, but harder work when we got them back. It's like doing a strainer post for every tree. Our neighbour John and I had to tamp them all down. You couldn't use a crowbar.

**SM:** What soil preparation is required for each tree?

**RS:** We deep-ripped about 1.2 to 1.3 metres with a dozer and then I rotary-hoed it three or four times. Then I went down with a post-hole digger and dug a 450mm hole to cover the root mass. It sounds quick, but it was bloody slow. We pruned them and put them in with a mycorrhiza – like a good fungus – and a good bacteria as well.

**SM:** Has there been much agri-science to the whole venture?

**DW:** Robbie's quite lucky because he was a townie, so he had no preconceived or inherited farming habits. When you look at farming practices in our parents' days, it was all about superphosphate and you didn't really get a long-term gain. He's been very studious and has quite easily grasped the concept of the soil being alive and good tree hygiene.

**SM:** Is there a rigid annual cycle to follow once the trees are established?

**DW:** You have to put them to sleep properly because they're deciduous and go into dormancy. Then it's knowing when to prune, how to prune, when to feed and what to feed.

**SM:** And when to harvest?

**RS:** We have now been to Turkey three times and each time we meet with Riza Kecceci at his pomegranate cafe in Daylan. One of the first times we went, we took some photos of our fruit. His father was talking in Turkish and we didn't understand him, but Riza explained that he'd said we'd picked "this one two weeks too early, that one three weeks too early, that one's okay" – just by looking at the crown. They're a fruit that you can't pick early. They do sweeten a bit in storage, but if they're not ripe, they're never going to be ripe.

**SM:** Has there been a sense of frustration at not being able to lay your hands on information quickly?

**DW:** Definitely, and we got to the stage where we realised we had to get an agronomist on board because we were finding out this stuff but only getting snippets of the whole picture. The man who supplied the trees from South Australia has been also been a phenomenal help because he's been in the business for 20 or 30 years. Again, luck would have it that Rob can form good working relationships with people because he's been in business himself a long time.

**SM:** As it stands right now, where do you sell your fruit?

**DW:** We've only really put ourselves out there in the last two years because the trees had to mature. The second crop was good, so we took that to the Farmers Market and got some good feedback so we were really excited about that. Now we're another year on and it is even better. We didn't suddenly appear, we wanted to build the story. We held back a

**continued page 20**





lot of stock this year that we could have sold in Perth because once we get our certificate to juice at the production room, then we make all these things like the syrups. From that base comes our products for the café like pomegranate ice cream, a wine, molasses and so on.

**SM:** What's your timeframe for the café?

**RS:** We've got our final drawings for the café, so hopefully in the next couple of weeks we'll get the go-ahead. It's only a small building that'll probably take three or four months to build, so hopefully by just after Christmas we'll actually be in the café.

**SM:** What was your total tonnage from last autumn?

**RS:** I think about three to four tonnes.

**SM:** What will the total yield look like with 6,000 mature trees?

**RS:** We'd be looking at 10 or 12 tonnes coming up in another couple of years.

**SM:** Is it true the whole fruit can be used for products other than food?

**DW:** From the oil I intend to make a cosmetic range. The properties of the skin of the fruit will form an exfoliant, the actual skin will go into the exfoliant. Another thing we're looking into is drying and grinding the skin for capsules. The cosmetic range will be five or six different products. There's a lot of antioxidants in the skin, so it's not just the fruit that's the star of the show. Our business plan is about using all of the fruit.

**SM:** Other than the US, are there many countries that can export the fruit into Australia?

**DW:** Iran, Iraq – all of that Middle Eastern stretch – India and even northern China are big producers, but we are very lucky that those countries have pests and diseases that won't pass our biosecurity and that protects our industry. The only ones you'll see on the shelf are from the USA.

**RS:** The Eastern States have got a



■ Riza Kecceci with his mother and father in the pomegranate cafe they founded in Dalyan, West Turkey. Rob and Debbie say the family have been extremely generous in sharing their knowledge of growing and processing the fruit.

particularly nasty fruit fly, and they aren't existent in WA. Lewis Horticulture were telling me that if we wanted to go down the path of export, we're situated perfectly because we haven't got them. The Eastern States producers can't export into Asia because of that fruit fly, so we're positioned very well.

**SM:** If you had a choice of one thing you could eat using your own product, what would it be?

**DW:** Ice cream. The ones we tasted in Turkey are made with the bulb of an orchid that grows in the mountains which is a thickening agent like cornflour. Their ice cream is just

beautiful. That's what we want to base our ice cream on.

**RS:** I'd be happy with a fresh supply of arils (seeds) year-round, because I love them on ice cream, for juice or just to eat them.

**SM:** Given that you have arrived at this point accidentally, would you do it all again?

**RS:** I asked myself that question when the fires came through last May and we thought we were going to lose everything. I didn't care about the house because I knew we could rebuild a little further up the hill, but I was worried we were going to lose all

the trees.

**DW:** Would we do it again? Hell yeah, we're addicted.

**SM:** You two seem like you're in a really good place.

**RS:** Even though we didn't set out on this by choice, it came along and it's about opportunities. This opportunity landed on our plate and – with our personalities – we're just loving it together as a couple.

**DW:** Absolutely. We just look forward to the day those doors open and we can share it all with the public because the health benefits of pomegranates should be available to everyone. **S**



■ The ever-expanding Pomegranate Hill orchard from above.