

MEET THE MAKER

Veteran orchardist calls time on cherries

FOR this month's chapter of Meet The Maker, Southerly Magazine spoke to long-time Red Gum Hill orchardist Darrel Souness about his passion for cherries and his pending retirement from the industry.

Southerly Magazine: How long have you been here at Red Gum Hill?

Darrel Souness: I was born here in Mt Barker about 73 years ago and I've lived on this property all my life. My grandfather started here in about 1908, so it's been in the family for over 100 years.

SM: Was the property always an orchard?

DS: We always had an orchard – apples and pears and some cherries.

SM: When did cherries first come to this property?

DS: About 70 years ago. We weren't on a big scale like we have now. A lot of those old trees are gone now.

SM: What is the lifespan of a cherry tree?

DS: Next door there are probably trees there that would be 50-odd years old. If they're looked after they'll last quite a long time. Usually what governs it is the variety change. As better varieties come in, the older trees come out. It's the same with apples.

SM: Did you go straight into the orchard business out of school?

DS: Probably even before I left school. My recollection as a kid was always in the orchard, under a tree. There were mainly apples here back then when Mt Barker was a really thriving apple town. Dad was crippled up with arthritis and Mum didn't keep that well, so I mostly came back and ran the farm from that time.

SM: What else was on the farm at that time other than apples?

DS: We had sheep. But probably about

25 years ago the apple varieties really changed. Pink Lady, Sundowner, Galas and Fujis all came in around that time, so we planted a lot more. We had two boys and they were coming back onto the farm, so that's the direction we took. They've since left to go and do other things. And I'm still here.

SM: How many acres do you have here?

DS: There's 150 acres on this property. There's about 40 acres of orchard now. There was more at one time. About 10 years ago there was another 20 acres, but we've taken some out.

SM: And the cherries have been consistent here over time?

DS: Probably over the last 40 years. There was a big market for it because Western Australia was isolated from the rest of the world, you might say, because of disease. They weren't allowed to bring cherries into Western Australia so we basically had to grow them our own. Things have changed now.

SM: Not for the better, in terms of the market?

DS: There's practically no cherry growers left. There'd be three orchards left in the Mt Barker region. All the rest are gone because they can bring cherries in from Eastern Australia or New Zealand.

SM: What are some of the quirks of the 12-month cycle of looking after cherry trees?

DS: After picking time it's mainly a case of managing disease. Brown rot is our biggest problem. You've got to break that cycle, usually by spraying it with oil in the winter time when the trees



are dormant. Lime and sulphur is also important because as the leaves fall off the tree it goes back into the ground, so you've got to prevent that coming back.

SM: During that dormancy do you feed the trees at all?

DS: We do fertilise them – usually with a crop like peas or lupins, green manure, to plough into the ground, rather than use artificial because green manure gets a lot of nitrogen. If you put on artificial nitrogen all you get is a big heap of growth and not much fruit. They're very hungry trees. With most other trees, like apples, the grass will grow quite easily around them but if you don't fertilise cherries, nothing

will grow there. The trees take all the nutrients out of the ground.

SM: The actual picking of cherries has to be done in a certain way to ensure fruit the following year?

DS: Yes, you can't break any shoots off. If you pull the stem out of the cherry they won't keep. When you're picking the cherries you'll see the buds for next year and, if you break that piece off, it'll never grow again, so it's pretty critical.

SM: And the winter can also be critical to the formation of your crop?

DS: It varies a lot, depending on the year. The conditions are against us because it's not cold enough for



most of the winter time. They can flower a lot but aren't necessarily going to set, so it can be quite unpredictable. The theory probably is that you've got one big crop every seven or



eight years and with the others you sometimes get practically nothing.

SM: What does the future entail for you and these trees?

DS: Well, the property is going to be sold. The people who are going to take over have got some orchard now.

SM: So this was definitely your last season?

DS: Yes, but I've enjoyed it.

SM: What now?

DS: Go and relax a bit. I've worked a lot of hours, but I've really enjoyed it. I've got to move on because I just can't keep going anymore. You hurt too much. It needs someone who's genuinely going to have a go at it, because it's been good to me.

SM: Do you look forward to seeing someone else doing well here?

DS: Yes, and I'll give them every opportunity, and give them a hand to do it too.

SM: This property has been a big part of your life, so the pending shift must be a bit strange?

DS: Well that's right, it's been my job and my home.

SM: What have you and Zalie got planned?

DS: We've looked at a house in town with a few acres and we'll plant a few fruit trees.

SM: Old habits die hard?

DS: You go into the shops and buy some fruit, and I tell you, after eating what we've been growing, it's not the same. Zalie will go and buy some apples and they look alright, but you get them home and there's no taste.

SM: What are the mechanics of a good cherry?

DS: It doesn't really matter, as long as it tastes good. The biggest problem over the years is that these are very old varieties, so they've been around ever since I can remember. But they've brought a lot of new varieties out that look really big and beautiful but they don't have the taste. And it's not just cherries, it's other fruit as well.

SM: How many varieties of cherries do you have here?

DS: About 15 different varieties. There's a few old ones, but you can't buy the trees anymore, so you've got a lot of new varieties that don't really suit our climate. Sometimes you get a really good crop and

other times you don't.

SM: Is it the same battle that grape growers have in getting the sugar content high enough?

DS: That's right, and you can't force the tree too much. You could pour a big heap of water on it, but then you lose the taste and the flavour, so we never water cherry trees. We depend entirely on natural rain. On a dryer year you get better flavour.

SM: But lower yields?

DS: Not necessarily. Cherries ripen at the end of November/December when there's still moisture there, not like apples that go even to January, February, March, April, so they depend on some irrigation.

SM: The grapes next door at Galafrey are dry-grown.

DS: Yes, it can be done.

SM: Do you like cherries yourself?

DS: Oh, yeah, but I don't eat many.

SM: What's the best way to have them?

DS: Straight off the trees or stew them. Stewed cherries and ice-cream. Can't beat it. People say "oh, you can't cook them, you eat them raw". I say "well try it". It's really good because the tastes are really different. You wouldn't quite expect the difference in flavours. **S**

