

Irwin Hunter & Co.

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Soil and management are keys to success.

A pasture in Boyup Brook based on Roper and Camel perennial ryegrasses produces over 14,000 kg of dry matter per annum.

Premiere Deer Farm at Boyup Brook, which runs the largest herd of English Deer in Australia, is an excellent example of the success that can be achieved with the correct pasture selection and management.

The mixture of Roper, Camel perennial ryegrasses and sub clover has provided excellent production over the past two years.



Consultant Graham Laslett observes the importance of a systems approach to pasture management.

Below he details the significance of understanding the information to be gathered from soil testing and effectively utilising and applying this information in farming techniques.

"The significant problems that you face today cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them in the first place" – Albert Einstein.

There are a number of factors that may be considered when re-establishing a pasture or deciding on the most appropriate course of action that may be considered.

Composition, quality and production were considered and those factors affecting them discussed.

Foremost among these was the need for identifying the nutritional needs of different pasture species and how they will respond in terms of the success or otherwise of pasture re-establishment or renovation.

New pasture species often have very different soil and nutritional requirements to the species or indeed varieties that you are currently growing.

As a result the competitiveness, persistence and production of the pasture can be seriously compromised if specific nutritional requirements are not met and the exercise deemed a failure.

This is often not the fault of the new variety or species but a lack of understanding of the pasture's needs. So where to from here?

Soil testing

Soil testing is a simple albeit often unpleasant task, which I consider one of if not the most important event in the annual farming calendar.

Fertiliser is the single greatest input expenditure on most farms whatever their ilk with the greatest capacity to affect the success and profitability of a productive enterprise.

A day or two spent testing or a few thousand dollars on a contractor is a wise investment.

Test paddocks according to soil types and relative production of various areas of the paddocks.

Light sandy soils, gravels, loams, clay loams, clays and a myriad of variations of texture, colour and production capacity are easily identifiable within any paddock.

These must be sampled according to their production potential, perceived inadequacies or consistently high production.

Identifying what each soil needs to perform to its optimum given its intended use for the season is the key.

The soil must be tested randomly within the areas selected and to the full depth of the sampling tool as indicated in the directions that come with sampling kits.

The accuracy of a test is only as good as your sampling technique.

Observation is one of the great strengths of farmers and in the livestock operation this is particularly important when soil testing:

Observe the surrounding bushland. This will give clear indication to soil types and variations in soils that are not obvious to the eye.

Observe grazing patterns. Many problems in paddocks can be isolated and effectively tested by observation of what stock do and do not graze.

I find stock the greatest aid in tracking down problems in pasture paddocks available. If they will not eat the grass in a particular part of the paddock but always hammer down the rest, there is a reason for it. Test the soil according not only to soil type but by what the stock are trying to tell you.

You may be surprised by what you find.

Interpretation

All too frequently farmers will inform me that they don't do soil tests any more as they are always told the same thing.

"Put on more super"! or "Just put on what you are currently applying". That brings us back to the opening quote and the very reason the farmer did the soil tests.

There was something wrong and doing what you have always done is unlikely to fix it.

Often I find a farm with decades of accumulated soil tests all telling a story of developing problems or old ones never getting any better but the farmer still applying what has been recommended for the last however many years or what can be afforded.

All along, many of the answers to their production worries are sitting in the bottom of the old filing cabinet.

You have paid to have eight or more parameters per soil tested.

Why then do people only look at one or two? Interpretation is for most farmers the key to successful soil tests and ultimately successful production. Demand to know more from those servicing and interpreting your soil tests about the other nutrients tested and their relative importance to your farm and its production requirements.

Good professional consultations are founded on information and in this case soil tests.

How do you get the most out of your soil tests?

Test thoroughly and accurately.

Observation of soil types, production trends and animal behavior is fundamental.

Have a clear vision of what the production aims for the paddock are.

Have the tests clearly and fully interpreted.

Have a clear understanding of the species you wish to grow.

Trust the accuracy of the tests if you have samples well.

Seed out quality advice.

Take action.

My interpretation of the opening quote?

If you always do what you have always done you will always get what you have always got! Nothing will change.

In my business the success of the farmer is dependent upon his soils and his management. Soil tests are the first and foremost requirement when visiting a farm in an attempt to ensure success in all areas of production – particularly pasture.