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How does a small, run-down, neglected farm make you an income?

Small farms are nearly always financially maintained by the farmer working 'off-farm'. 'Get big or get out' has been a common saying among our neighbours.

There are lots of small farms like ours in Gippsland. We are not unique, but with care and respect for the land, it can be sustainable and profitable. It worked for us, it can work for you. This is how it worked for us.

My husband Jeff was a part-time farmer for a number of years before I met him and although he had been a farmer all his life, he was not from the area and so was not taken seriously by the old timers.

I was a city-born-and-bred girl when I met Jeff. To me it was the romance of being a farmer's wife. Yes, just like the TV show *The Farmer Wants a Wife*.

The whole farming caper seemed so exciting, adventurous and at the same time, a relaxing peaceful lifestyle.

So when he asked me if I was sure I could live the life of a farmer's wife? I had no hesitations. What girl would say no to living in such a beautiful place?

I knew absolutely nothing about farming, had never even see a cow up close before I visited the farm.

At the time Jeff was breeding and growing beef cattle and the farm was in the grip of a drought. He had offloaded most of his breeding stock for very little money.

All of this meant very little to me. I didn't have an understanding of what the consequences of a drought were.

Bushfires?. Well they were a tragic thing that happened to people in the bush. I had never been touched by it personally.

We made the decision to move permanently to our farm. So we both resigned from our part-time jobs in Melbourne, packed our worldly possessions and with the caravan in tow we made the move on a stinking hot day. It was February 7, 2009, later to be known as Black Saturday.

A few hours after arriving at our farm there was ash falling around us, gum leaves completely intact but blackened by fire were falling from the sky. It was scary.

Jeff made the decision that we had to get out as we had fires on two sides of our place.

That was my introduction to real farming life.

It was my first major hurdle. To leave behind my home, all my possessions, my memories still packed in boxes somewhere in the house.

He told me to pack a bag with only the most important items. I had no idea in which box my important items were in.

I broke down and cried. Is this farming? Is this living in the country? What happened to the serene, peaceful lifestyle I was expecting?

We escaped the fires unscathed, but emotionally I will always remember the feeling of abandoning everything we had worked for and leaving it all behind.

Every dollar we had both earned our whole life had gone into the farm. The experience brought home to us how important our farm was, to us and to the community.

The second hurdle came 12 months later when we realised that after working hard on the farm for 12 months it wasn't making an income for us.

We were not receiving any off-farm income either. So we had to rethink our strategy of making the land earn us an income.

The third major challenge was when we discovered biological farming. After the bushfires, when we realised how important our land was with its lovely views, creeks and gullies filled with large old blackwood trees and ferns, we changed our farming methods.

We learnt that if you understand the soil, respect the land, it will become fertile and you can make an income from it.

This was a big decision but rather an easy change for us as the farm had been neglected for many years so had not been subjected to years of chemical fertilisers. We began to use organic fertilisers such as compost, compost teas and Seasol. We diversified and began breeding not only beef cattle, but lambs and rare breed pigs.

Our neighbours took notice and now some of them are also breeding pigs. The city girl has become a farmer, converting the neighbours to breed pigs!

Realising that our land was producing a good product that was free-range and chemical-free, which is much sought-after by concerned consumers, we set up a business selling our products – beef, pork and lamb direct to the customer in small bulk packaging providing free delivery direct to their door. It's been a winner right from the start.

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