



Mirani grower Tim Bone inspects this year's crop in March 2017.

Tackling productivity one step at a time at Mirani

After almost seven years of growing sugarcane west of Mackay, Tim Bone and family are starting to see the positive results of productivity enhancements that they have made to their business. By Brad Pfeffer

When Tim Bone first moved to Mirani in 2010, he already had a lifetime of experience with farming and agriculture, but sugarcane was a whole new ball game.

He had grown up in a grain cropping area in Victoria, and had also been working with his wife, Megan, and her family growing grain at Dysart in Central Queensland.

When they bought the property at Mirani in 2010, he admits that it was a steep learning curve that had the added challenge of making a foothold in the industry during a run of consecutive wet and challenging years.

But after overcoming those initial hurdles and now, almost seven years down the track, Tim says that they are now starting to see the results of their

hard efforts over this time in gradually making productivity improvements.

Yields are generally in the 90 tonne per hectare (TCH) range, and he has the goal of getting them to 100 TCH and above in coming years.

The first steps came with introducing new varieties and removing old ratoons, as well as soil testing, which revealed pH problems that have since required lime to rectify. Soybeans are now also a critical component of the crop cycle.

"Being new to sugarcane farming I've had to learn very quickly," Tim said.

"That means going to SRA events, and MAPS (Mackay Area Productivity Services) shed meetings, and also just talking with local progressive growers.

"You don't always have to agree with what someone else is doing, but if you pick up one useful piece of information that can help."

They have 103 hectares under cane and main varieties include Q208[®], Q240[®], Q242[®], Q183[®] and some Q138.

"We spread it around because we are trying to watch our rotations in relation to pachymetra and other diseases. I've heard the stories of rust getting hold of Q124 back in the day, so we are aware of the risk of a disease knocking out a particular variety and we want to make sure we are not susceptible to having the bulk of the farm ever being wiped out.

"You obviously have to look at your most productive varieties that will make you most money, but you also have to spread your risk."

The next step is widening the rows from 1.6 metres to dual row 1.8 m. Tim saw the benefits of this from his work driving a harvester for local grower and contractor, Graeme Blackburn, where he was able to quickly see the damage that the harvester could do to the stool on narrow row configurations.

"We're still building productivity per hectare, but I'm hoping that we can reduce harvesting costs by going down fewer rows, less passes in the paddock with preformed beds, and getting an increase in ratoon length. We changed our first 8ha last year and all our planting this year will go out to 1.8 m, so it will be interesting to see the results once we get the harvester in there."

Another change has been shifting the farm from dunder fertiliser to all granular with a stool splitter and double-disc openers, applied 100mm deep with Confidor for grub control where required.

"We believe in using zinc via foliar application, and all up we find that this approach is doing an excellent job."

"We also want to be efficient with our nutrient use. Having the fertiliser underground helps minimise the runoff as we are very conscious of the environment here being in a high rainfall area."

"At the end of the day we can't afford to be applying chemical and fertiliser that isn't effective where it needs to be."

The farm also has irrigation, although the season for 2017 has generally not required large amounts of irrigation. Up until Cyclone Debbie in late March, the cane was looking promising, but it now has severe damage and Tim estimates losses will be in the order of 15 to 20 percent, depending on what varieties were grown close to rivers and dams, with Q138 being the worst.

He already had standover from last season and there are concerns about the 2017 harvest with dealing with the aftermath of the cyclone.

"We are looking at a low season for sugar content as well due to the cane being lodged."

"Last season was a real juggling act with the wet conditions. Depending on the ground conditions, we had to wait with some paddocks and didn't always cut where we wanted," he said.

"By the end we ended up leaving Q240[®] and some Q252[®] that was standing straight and was plant cane that I didn't want to bog out."

The biggest downside will be an area of lodged Q242[®] that he was not able to get to before the end of the season.

For more information

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Below: The early dual-row plant cane in August 2016.

