



Going solo – thanks to ingenuity and innovation

He is 26 years old, but Bowen farmer David Richardson already has a decade of full time farming under his belt – something that is proving to be a valuable asset with the family being the only cane growers in the local region. By Brad Pfeffer

Starting out sugarcane farming is not easy. And that job gets even harder when you are doing it at 16 years old. Then it gets harder again when you are in a district with very few other farmers and horticulture is the main game in town.

But that is exactly what Bowen farmer David Richardson did almost 10 years ago along with his father Hugh, who was an accountant by background.

Today, the Richardsons are the only farmers growing cane at Bowen, growing about 10,000 tonne each year that makes the 80km journey south to Proserpine mill.

Ten years ago, when David left school to start farming full time, there was a small number of farmers growing cane at Bowen, with the main proponent being Jamie Jurgens. While the district peaked at close to 30,000 tonne, Jamie and the other farmers have since stopped growing cane at Bowen, although Jamie continues to grow cane elsewhere.

“We started by taking over a block of cane that Jamie was growing on some of our land, and we kept going,” David said.

“Small crops weren’t an option, as when you are 16 years old no one wants to take any notice of you if you are telling them what to do, so the cane was a way to get started that was easier and needed less labour.”

The foundation for the cane growing including the investment in a tractor and laser bucket, which David drove after school and on weekends to build dams for their farms.

David said that there were challenges being the only farmers now growing cane in the district. For example, they need to own all their own gear and also have the skills to fix it and modify it quickly.

An example of this challenge occurred earlier this year when their Cameco harvester burnt out while parked at the end of the day.

The images of the harvester and billowing smoke quickly did the rounds of the industry on Facebook, but for the Richardsons it presented a real challenge in finding help to finish the season.

In Bowen, there are no cane-growing neighbours down the road to call upon to ask for a hand.

This has meant a strong reliance on their own ingenuity and skills. It helps that David completed a certificate two in agriculture through the Burdekin Ag College, and also a cert three as a diesel mechanic.

“We build and fix all our own gear: slashers, sprayers, implements, even packing gear for the small crops,” he said. “We have to, because it is expensive to go to the engineering works.”

They have recently started growing some small crops as well, which David said “growing sugarcane has taught us how to do”.

"We are self-taught, so have learnt as we have gone along, along with the help of agronomists," he said.

The horticultural crops can fluctuate wildly in their price in what he describes as "boom or bust", meaning that they carry much more risk.

This, year, for example, he said that their produce was not worth the cost of picking, packing and transport – let alone the growing costs that came before that.

"It has been excellent growing conditions in 2017, and after Cyclone Debbie everyone thought Bowen would take a lot longer to recover and bounce back, but we ended up with a large and high-quality crop, which depressed prices."

For the cane, they have two b-double side-tippers that move 34 tonne per load and make the round trip to Proserpine in about two hours and ten minutes if the traffic is okay.

Their preferred varieties are KQ228[®] and Q208[®], which David said handled the dry weather better than other varieties that they grow, with David feeling that KQ228[®] could be water stressed at harvest and still ratooning well on their farms.

Now using mostly flood irrigation, they have tried a few different methods of irrigation over the years, including drip tape and a travelling irrigator. They had some challenges with rats chewing holes in the tape, although did say that it produced some big cane in its first years.

He prefers growing sugarcane, but admits that it has a bit of an uncertain future locally unless there are more growers at Bowen.

The main barriers though are the high water and land prices, driven up by the small crops.

"Labour is also a challenge. We can easily find people with a car licence who want to work on the small crops, as they come to Bowen for that work. But finding someone with a truck licence to work part of the year is a big challenge."

Below: Small crops are now part of the business that has been built from sugarcane for David Richardson.

Below inset: Despite some impacts from Cyclone Debbie earlier this year, this year's crop has been reasonable, according to David Richardson.

