

(Below) The Little Mulgrave River joins the Mulgrave River on HJ's property. (Over page - left) Little Mulgrave grower HJ Way checks over his peanuts in March, just a few weeks after planting. (Over Page - top right) HJ Way and MSF agronomist Noel Wright check out the peanut planter HJ and his son, Daniel, built. (Over Page - bottom right) The peanuts up and away for HJ Way's first ever peanut crop.

PEANUT VENTURE IMPROVES FARMING SYSTEM

PEANUTS HAVE MADE AN APPEARANCE FOR THE FIRST TIME ON THE LITTLE MULGRAVE PROPERTY OF HJ WAY. BY BRAD PFEFFER

Far North Queensland cane grower HJ Way had heard plenty of people say that it was not possible to grow peanuts in the Wet Tropics. He'd also seen plenty of others doing it successfully for many years.

This year, he is testing things for himself and has planted peanuts for the first time over about 10 hectares of his fallow country in the Little Mulgrave area, west of Gordonvale.

It was a learning curve from the start. He had hoped to plant in December 2018, but conditions were too dry. Then wet weather set in for several months and it was only in early March that he could plant, and even then he faced muddy conditions.

He has used on-farm ingenuity to keep costs down and ease the transition, building a two-row peanut planter and bed former with the help of his son, Daniel. The implement is an old rotary hoe, modified with a deep ripper to bust up compaction, old ratooning discs and a bed former, followed by the planter. The hope is that the mound for the peanuts will work nicely for minimum-till planting the cane soon after the peanuts.

He said he was still learning with keeping the seed flowing and the best speed for planting, but so far it had "done a beautiful job".

"We're not trying to grow the world's champion peanuts. We're trying to grow an economic crop," HJ said.

"We'll have a good look at our costs and returns and see how they stack up with profitability, after harvest in June or July.

"We needed to look at something else to work with the cane and see if we could get a cash crop from our fallow. Once we take into account all our production costs, including insurance and repairs and maintenance, and everything with the business, there is only a few dollars per tonne in the cane on some of our farms, so we needed to look at other things."

The peanut work forms part of Project Uplift, which is an initiative run by MSF Sugar and supported by the Australian Government Reef Trust. It works with growers to adopt practices identified through the Sugar Yield Decline Joint Venture and that are part of an Improved Farming System (IFS) or SRA Farming System.

As well as having a legume rotation, which for HJ is peanuts, Project Uplift encourages growers to adopt minimum tillage, controlled traffic, and green cane trash blanketing.

It offers interest free loans and cash grants of 50 percent for works such as re-designing blocks and drainage improvement. It also comes with the support of the MSF Sugar agronomy team, which has been vital for HJ in learning the ropes of a new crop and helping with specifics such as crop nutrition.

For example, MSF Sugar have assisted with advice for gypsum application to help the peanuts make the grade for calcium, knowing that lime would probably be too expensive, especially at the start as he assesses gross margins.

Project Uplift is also helping HJ adopt controlled traffic by purchasing GPS equipment through an interest free loan.

He is currently at 1.75m rows, but starting with the peanuts he is making the shift to wider rows of 1.85 metres. He started at 1.8m, but thanks to a sliding axle on his main tractor he shifted to 1.85 metres halfway through the peanut planting as he felt it gave him just that bit more for the bed top.

"Because of the 600mm tyres, 1.85m gave me that bit more room, while at 1.8m I was riding up onto the bed," he said.

"Without the Uplift Program I never would have bought the GPS. Maybe I would have gone to wide metres rows, but now with the GPS I can see the system is so much better."

Another learning curve came with the deep ripping.

"I was going down to about 700mm as the advice from the MSF blokes was that there was a second compaction layer down there, which I struggled to get through.

"I'd made longer legs for my ripper to get down, and with a nine tine ripper with the 240 horsepower tractor it had no pull.

"It took a while to get down past that 700mm because the layer was that hard and packed tight, and that's why I've put a single tine on the peanut planter to get down past the 700mm. Even then you could feel it with the big tractor."

He said this created a much larger root zone for the crop, which also had the benefit of assisting to keep nutrient

accessible to the plant, especially in summers like 2018/19 where the Mulgrave Mill area had its second largest rainfall event on record.

Project Uplift has also helped him with on-farm works for drainage and sediment control.

"It has helped me build a rock wall at the bottom of a block that had a lot of water run through. Now, I've got that much sediment there I get bogged when I go down there, and that's sediment that is not going down the river."

He said that there was still plenty of work to continue to improve drainage, but he needed to tackle it gradually and in an affordable way.

All up, he said the program was a positive for growers, for the mill, and the environment.

"Everything is getting more efficient, and there's no wastage of inputs, which is a big plus and one of the big benefits of Uplift," HJ said.

"We want to keep our environment clean and leave this place in a better spot than when we came here. Since I was a kid I've always fished, caught prawns, and put a boat in the river. A lot of things have changed over the years, but we are trying to do as much as we can." ■

