

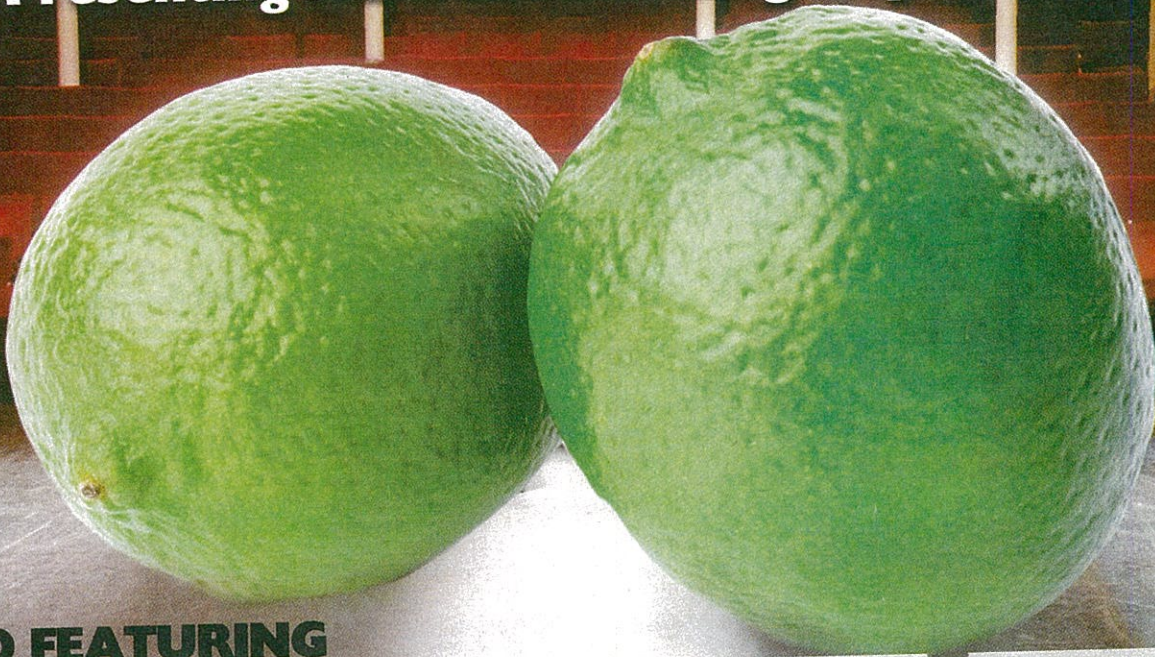
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10 Dexters

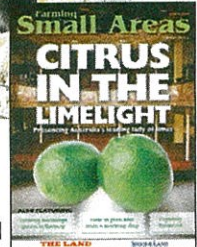
Ray and Lyndal Keen of Kurrajong in Sydney's North West have developed a passion for versatile, dual purpose Dexters.

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Hobby herd's flexibility

STORY and PICTURES
Kim Chappell

WHAT BEGAN AS A SEARCH for some grass munchers has turned into a passion for Ray and Lyndal Keen, Keenleavale Dexter stud, in Kurrajong in Sydney's North West.

The Keens started with two "older" heifers in 2002 to keep the grass on their four-hectare (10 acre) block down, but two or so years later they were breeding their cows and eating the meat,

with a herd of about 13.

The original two heifers wouldn't get into calf, so they bought two cows and a calf and started to breed up in 2004-05.

These days they are looking to get a naturally polled herd and are trying to add some colour into it, chasing the red and dun genes.

They bought a bull 18 months ago which successfully did that, so they now have a red calf and a dun calf on the ground.

The bull, Graham, came from Robyn Herring's Mt Pleasant

stud at Maraylya.

He's one of many bulls they have used, including some they've leased and one of their own which they have since sold.

In the past they also used artificial insemination in the herd, something which was affordable when they only had a few stock but they said it now made more sense to get a bull in.

They look for cattle that have long bodies and good temperaments.

The Keens were drawn to Dexters because of their compact size and dual purpose abilities.

"For a person new to small acres, Dexters are really good, and the meat is supreme," Mrs Keen said.

The sound base of knowledge in the association and the number of locals who also had the breed, meant starting off with Dexter cattle was easy as they had local people to call on.

"And we love the colours as well, you never really know what you are going to get.

"It's about waiting to see what colour and sex they are."

With their three children – Hamish, 14, Thomas, 11 and Caitlin, 10 – getting older, the Keens were also starting to think about showing their best cattle.

"The children are getting interested in showing now," Mrs Keen said.

This flexibility – to do as much or as little with the cattle as they like – is also important to the family.

The cattle are a hobby with Mr and Mrs Keen both in full time work.

Mr Keen is a computer analyst and Mrs Keen a horticultural consultant and landscape designer.

"You can go away on holidays and give them an automatic waterer and if its a bad year a round bale, whereas with our horses we need somebody to come in and rug and feed them everyday," Mrs Keen said.

Mrs Keen also said they had wanted cattle because they were better at grazing the paddocks down than horses.

"We have two ponies and the cattle eat all the areas they don't, so



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Lyndal and Ray Keen, Keenleavale stud, Kurrajong, with their Dexter cattle.

we have a paddock rotation going on."

They also have two black-faced Suffolk which they originally bought to eat the fireweed and for the freezer.

"They have the fireweed under control but our daughter is so attached to them now we're not sure what to do with them."

The Keens have done some improvement work on their pastures, they found their soils

were too acidic so they've added lime and organic manure to boost the pH which was at 4.5 to 5.5.

"In winter we oversow with vetch or oats," Mr Keen said.

"We've also planted a little lucerne paddock for the first time this year.

"We are by no means commercial, it's a hobby we get a lot of enjoyment from."

The cattle have also helped spread the kikuyu across the

paddocks, Mr Keen said, with the grass originally being a mix of couch, paspalum and carpet grass.

"The cattle keep the paddocks healthy, we've got no weeds coming up and our grass is doing better.

"Our paddocks are like a golf course they are so green."

The Keens said one of the other advantages of the smaller Dexters was they didn't need to spend a lot on infrastructure on their property.

They have wire fencing and a small post and rail cattle yard, having not "spent a fortune" on yards and fences.

Mrs Keen said the cattle, however, had developed a knack for getting under the wire fences – but one line of hot wire about half way down the established fence put an end to that.

"If we need to shift them we've converted the horse float," Mrs Keen said.

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