



Persistence proves profitable

As distinct seasonal patterns become a thing of the past, Simon and Penny Foster, Ross, Tasmania are striving for pasture options that provide ultimate management flexibility. They recently shared the benefits of phalaris in their system with Catriona Nicholls.

“Coming out of three years of dry seasons, phalaris is proving its worth, particularly during the past month,” Simon said.

“Three years ago (2005) we had an incredibly good spring, the rain started during September and just kept coming. After a dry autumn we’d been aggressive in offloading stock before winter. Then it started raining and didn’t stop and we had feed coming out of our ears.

We had water in places that hadn’t seen water since the 1970s. All the grass took off and by the end of summer the phalaris was higher than the bonnet of the Landcruiser.

But since then we’ve been sitting on a rolling 12-month average between 300 and 350 mm of rain with no seasonal pattern.

My father would talk about seasonal patterns. But during his early days (60s and 70s) the rainfall anomalies were positive about the long-term mean and the landscape was wetted up. And even if rainfall during autumn was low, subsoil moisture was there.

They talked about autumn breaks and conserving fodder in spring and designed their systems around this.

I’d say from the early 80s we’ve moved into a period where the rainfall anomalies are negative and if you miss out on rainfall in key months it has a big impact.

We now tend to think that rain could come at any time and so we need a farming system that can flex a lot more – roll with nature more, as we can no longer plan on distinct seasonal rainfall patterns.

Nowadays, we probably have to plan on not receiving an autumn break. However, we still plan for a spring and organise our feed

farm info.

Case study: Simon and Penny Foster

Location: Ross, Tasmania

Property size: 7780 ha

Mean annual rainfall: 450 mm

Soils: Highly variable ranging from black cracking clay through to sands

Enterprises: Fine wool Merinos, prime lambs, beef cattle, irrigated lucerne, cereals



Photos: Catriona Nicholls

Phalaris is providing Simon Foster with a pasture option that supports flexibility in an unpredictable climate. INSET: The superior ability of phalaris (background) to take advantage of opportunistic rainfall when compared with annual species (foreground) is obvious.

demand to match the feed supply during this period.

Our farm advisor has a strong focus on planning but we haven’t entirely got our heads around that because it requires a real shift in our thinking. We’re happy to design a system that doesn’t rely on an autumn break, we just haven’t done it yet.

There’s always a positive to what can appear as a negative situation. Recently, high grain prices seemed negative, but they have forced us to destock earlier and more aggressively than we would have done had prices been lower. During the past we may have kept those sheep, which would have had a negative impact on the pasture base and our mental health from the monotony of dragging grain bins around.

So high grain prices meant we have faced decisions differently and it has been positive for all sorts of reasons.

Phalaris – the survivor

My father was somewhat ahead of his time and started sowing phalaris in the mid 60s, when it wasn’t a common practice in the

district. He saw phalaris as making sense because it was perennial, deep rooted and by all accounts it would survive dry seasons and grubs. He sowed a mix including phalaris, cocksfoot, perennial ryegrass, white and subclovers because he had a view that across a paddock plants would find a niche within it.

During the past year, I have objectively assessed the species diversity in our paddocks and groundcover. What we’re left with after 40 years is phalaris and subclover – the ryegrass has gone, cocksfoot has survived in places, but disappeared in others.

Phalaris is persisting in our environment and with our grazing regime – which I describe as ‘flexible’. We set stock when appropriate and rotate when appropriate.

We’ve just come out of one of the driest Octobers on record and wettest November for 24 years – you’ve got to be so flexible with your grazing in those circumstances.

During October it looked like February after a poor spring and now after approximately 70 mm of rain it looks like early September – over just four weeks.

key points

- Phalaris provides the ability to be flexible in terms of an unpredictable climate
- The ability to survive extended dry periods outperforms many other traditional species
- Establishment of perennial species such as phalaris is a valuable long-term investment.



Photos: MAIN: Carriana Nicholls, INSET: Penny Foster

The difference four weeks and rain makes: MAIN: December 3, 2008 INSET: November 5, 2008.

Acting accordingly

When it started to rain, we moved the sheep off the perennials to allow the pasture to take advantage of the rain. The annuals were already setting seed and drying off, so we stocked those and used some of our irrigated lucerne to hold the stock until the phalaris pastures recovered sufficiently to graze.

The other key thing about phalaris in this environment is that it survives. Yes, it has an establishment cost but you can spread that across 40 years. You might have to re-sow a species such as ryegrass every eight years.

We've got paddocks identified that currently contain annuals that we will sow down to perennials. And I think we will sow phalaris

and we won't sow ryegrass because it doesn't persist. Although, I am always open to new species and keen to run trials for complementary pasture species.

Phalaris toxicity

People talk about phalaris toxicity and poisoning and to be honest, I've never really considered it. I would go as far as saying we haven't lost a single animal to it – but on the other hand, we've lost sheep to ryegrass staggers.

Our veterinary consultant recently said 'there has been more sheep lost in the Midlands of Tasmania due to a lack of phalaris rather than phalaris toxicity'.

One thing about phalaris is that it doesn't fit croppers' programs because they want a short-term grass solution to include in their rotations.

Long-term investment

The thing about phalaris is that in establishing it you need to take a long-term view and do everything right in terms of paddock preparation. It needs to be sown into adequate moisture and you can't be too quick to graze it – as farmers we can often be impatient, we see the green pick and it's very tempting to graze it immediately.

We sow the pasture, allow it to set seed and then it is two to two and a half years before we really consider the paddock to be in the system – you can bring it all undone if you rush the system.

You've got to take that long-term view. We've seen phalaris pastures that have been here for 40 years and if you look at it like that it's not a long time – it is a sound investment that offers flexibility in an unpredictable climate." 🌱

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science behind the story

By Sandy McEachern, Holmes Sackett

- **Highly profitable grazing systems are continually compromising between what is best for the pasture, what is best for the livestock and what is best for the wallet. For Simon Foster, phalaris has proven to be a species that can handle these compromises.**

Many producers get caught up with using species that do well at particular times of the year. Other species do respond better at various times throughout the year and phalaris can only be considered a second runner in most instances. But better responses are worthless if the species dies under tough commercial and climatic conditions.

Phalaris will never be the top performer at any one time of the year but because of its sheer persistence in the longer term it is the most profitable option.

I think Simon's observations on his pasture species diversity is also

important. Why sow a mix of perennial species when only one is going to survive? If producers identify that other species don't persist, sowing a mix only aims to leave gaps in the pasture for annual weeds to fill down the track.

While all care must be taken in its establishment, Australian phalaris is notorious for its persistence when established and can present a weed risk in certain locations. As persistence is the number one profit driver for perennial pasture establishment, Australian phalaris has proven to be the best value for money. You can kill it, but you have to try hard.

I would argue there is still a seasonal pasture production pattern in Simon's local area, in as much as spring generally offers better reliability than autumn. Strategically, their system is designed around a better spring, for example lambing and calving times are chosen to match seasonal peak pasture production.

But in terms of variability within in each season Simon has the flexibility to make tactical decisions as the season plays out because of his perennial pastures.

As Simon points out, the common perception that phalaris toxicity is a significant barrier to adoption doesn't really match with reality. The stock losses associated with toxicity pale into insignificance when compared with the potential production benefits gained from having a persistent perennial pasture option.

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