

Slow Food[®] Hunter Valley

Biodiversity at our Doorstep (Apr 2016)

Just outside Maitland, on top of a once barren mound of sand and gravel, Austin and Laurel Breiner are working to regenerate land that was left decimated by a mining company. Despite a requirement for the mining company to “remediate” the land back to its original state, the



reality of what was left behind was vastly different – a six metre high expanse of sand and gravel where nothing grew. But as they say, where there is a will there is a way and the once decimated site is now an incredibly productive small-scale farm and personal retreat.

When you enter the Breiner’s small acreage an avenue of trees lines one side of the driveway. As you approach the house the avenue of trees gives way to a small rainforest that offers a cool sanctuary from the heat of the day. Past the house – and across a small, still infertile paddock – a large vegetable garden is baking under the summer sun. Directly opposite the house is an orchard. All this on land where once nothing grew!

The Breiners live on the banks of the Hunter River. In any other situation this would be synonymous with nutrient-rich farming land. But for this small farm, the road to productive and fertile soils has been a decade in the making and is still a work in progress.

The legacy of the mining is difficult to fathom until you contrast the revegetated areas – where Austin and Laurel have worked to recover the land – with those areas where the sand and gravel are still evident. Juxtaposed against each other the differences are stark. The rejuvenated

land spawns all manner of life while the gravel and sand paddocks – that remain untouched by Austin and Laurel – sprout small tufts of grass and little else. In fact, the texture of the ground reminds me of the red dirt country out around Cobar; grainy and hard – except out there at least the Leopardwood, Turpentine, Mallee, Sandalwood and Eucalypts still grow, and after the rain the wild flowers sprout and grass is plentiful.

When Laurel and Austin first purchased the land they knew its history but could not have imagined the state of the soils. Despite this, everywhere you turn there is evidence of the massive effort that has gone into rejuvenating the otherwise barren property. This is truly an example of



what we call “living in the Ark”, where biodiversity reigns supreme. Collection upon collection of plants ranging from the common to the obscure – all made possible through years of hard work, persistence and dogged determination.

While there is much to admire at the Breiner’s farm, perhaps the most surprising find was the rainforest that Austin has planted. “Dad went gold prospecting up in the New England Ranges in the depression and sometimes I went up there with him. The rain forest fascinated me.” he said. Today this fascination has translated into the rainforest we see today with its rich organic soils, enclosed upper canopy and rich undergrowth.

We can’t underestimate the effort that has gone into the rejuvenation process. One hundred and eighty seven (yes, 187) ute-loads of soil shovelled by hand from the bottom of a dry dam, countless loads of manure, and endless grass clippings that have composted down

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into nitrogen-rich soils have all aided in improving the fertility of the ground. Today, as we stand beneath the canopy of the rainforest Austin picks up a handful of soil and proudly displays it – it looks just like the dark rich soils of the rainforests I have seen further north.



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The orchard – now boasting some 70 to 80 trees – started around eight years ago before the Breiner's started building their house. As we tour the orchard Austin points out trees of all varieties – avocado, pomelo (sometimes spelt pummelo) – the largest of the citrus – pomegranate, mandarins, mulberries, cherry guava, white and black sapote, carambola, finger lime, native lime, kaffir lime, tangelo, acerola cherry, kiwi berry, hazelnut, pecan, chestnut, quince (with a grafted pear no less), chinotto, shiraz grapes, tropical guava, persimmon, olive, lemon, davidson plum, feijoa, avocado, custard apple, pawpaw, 7 kinds of ginger ... and by now I think you get the picture. "I try and get different things all the time. I see something I haven't seen and I like to give it a go" says Austin.

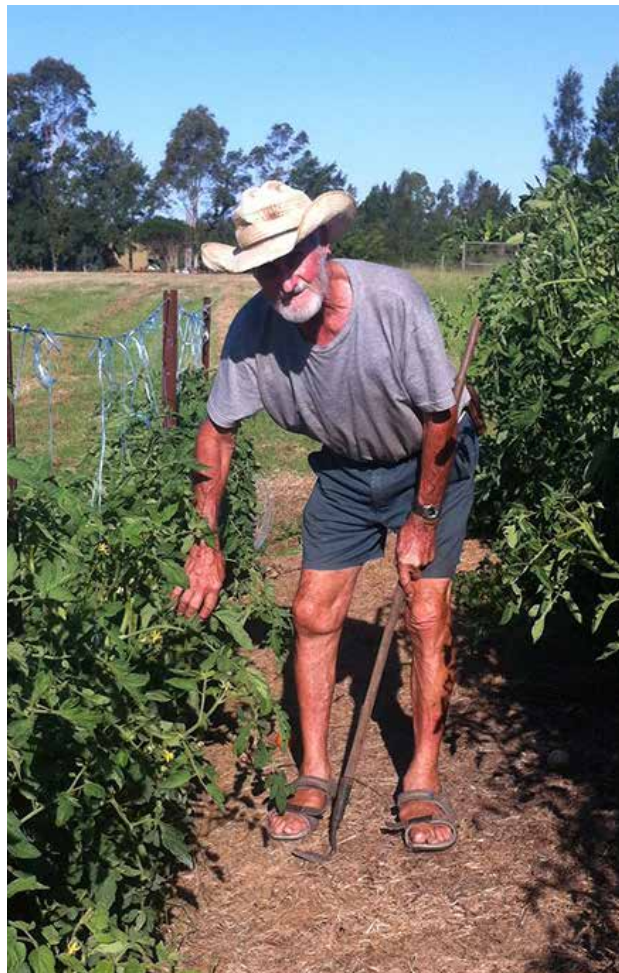
In the vegetable garden we learn that Austin's father, Richard Breiner, was a market gardener in L

outh Park where he grew tomatoes in what he believed was "the best soil in New South Wales". A friend of Austin's father – an agronomist by the name of John Douglas – was in Germany in 1938 and mailed back a small matchbox of seeds. The seeds were a variety of tomato called the grosse lisse which translates as "big Liz".

This small box of seeds became a staple crop on the Louth Park farm and later on a small market garden in Tenambit (where Richard Beiner continued to farm the tomatoes). These

tomatoes have been cultivated around Maitland by Austin's father for around 57 years. Today the tradition survives in the vegetable garden at Oakhampton where Austin continues to propagate this large, sweet variety for which his father was so well known. "Tomatoes breed true-to-type. They won't cross pollinate because they do not need bees pollinating them." Austin tells us.

Watering around the property has been a problem and when it is dry Austin has to hand-water. Over the last two months (to early April 2016) Austin has carted around 1000 litres of



water a week (in 20 litre drums) on the back of his tractor from the dam to his vegetable garden. In the absence of a watering system, Austin then waters by hand. "We put a spearhead down and hit salt water." He tells us. "Salt water



is in the bottom layer. It sits below the fresh water. So now whatever falls from heaven we take with gratitude which means we often have too much or too little." He stops and thinks for a moment and adds "But we are grateful for what we get."

As we end our tour of the property, we are left with a sense of the unfathomable dedication and hard work that has been required to breathe life back into this land. Austin seems to be like a force of nature.

We wait only for one thing now ... for Austin and Laurel Breiner to name their farm. When they do, the name of the farm will become synonymous with biodiversity.

