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Skillogalee Estate winemaker Kerri (KT) Thompson in a mid-row planted with everlastings as part of a plan to future-proof vineyards. Picture by Chelsea Ashmeade

Bloomin' fantastic outcome

BY CHELSEA ASHMEADE

EVEN in one of the driest years South Australia has seen, the wildflowers and native grasses planted at Skillogalee Estate, in the Clare Valley region, have thrived.

Skillogalee's winemaker Kerri (KT) Thompson is "gob-smacked" at just how well the natives have done, especially the Western Australian everlastings daisies.

The vine rows in front of Skillogalee's restaurant and cellar door have burst with colour as the everlastings show off their ability to thrive even in tough growing conditions.

But while they were specifically planted in those rows, they served a greater purpose than to "just look pretty".

The everlastings, along with a number of other South Australian species and Australian native grasses, have been planted as part of

the national EcoVineyards program.

Family-owned Skillogalee is the first South Australian vineyard to trial these mid-row species.

"I'm completely gob-smacked that they have grown in such a dry year," Ms Thompson said.

"If they can survive and grow and flourish in the driest season we have had, it's incredibly exciting."

Skillogalee joined EcoVineyards as an EcoGrower three years ago, with a number of projects designed to enrich soil health and biodiversity under way across the 170 hectare estate.

Planted mid-row, native plants are used to suppress weeds, improving the soil by opening up its structure, and support good bugs and pollinators - with the long-term goal of producing better fruit.

Ms Thompson said the aim was to improve biodiversity and soil health in

the vineyards.

"As part of this project, we are committed to planting a number of native species, from SA and other parts of Australia, to compare their water needs and growth habits. We are working towards a permanent ground cover that will self seed and do its own thing."

Since becoming involved with the project, Ms Thompson said the Skillogalee team had planted more than 1500 native plants and grasses across the 55-hectare herbicide-free vineyard.

Recent testing revealed leaf Brix numbers on the trial block are the highest on the property.

They've also discovered there are three different species of microbat on the estate which Ms Thompson said they were thrilled to see as they "eat all the bad bugs".

"It has been a really important project for us."

■ Continued P3

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Fat Farmers lift influence

BY CATHERINE MILLER

THE Fat Farmers movement has gained a new burst of energy with four new groups formed across SA this year at Balaklava, Millicent, Naracoorte and Lucindale.

The rural health initiative is the brainchild of three Maitland farmers who joined the gym in 2012 wanting to improve their physical fitness and has grown to 20 groups.

Fat Farmers general manager Michael Williams is hopeful this tally could double within the next year or two with plenty of interstate interest and two groups already formed.

"There is the fun, quirky part of Fat Farmers and the physical activity but it also fills that gap when people retire from playing footy and cricket they can miss out on that belonging to a team and social connection," he said.

Mr Williams believes there are a couple of reasons for the strong interest in Fat Farmers with new enquiries coming from partnering with the Hospital Research Foundation, but also rural communities seeing a need



Naracoorte Fat Farmers group members James Heffernan, Martin Flower, CJ Sommerville and Andrew Shepherd with Good Country Physiotherapy's Jasper Whitehead. Picture by Catherine Miller

to stay active and look after each other during the challenging season.

He says the concept has been a success giving farmers another option to get off-farm but also providing

a relaxed atmosphere for people of all abilities and fitness levels to exercise and strengthen their bodies.

"Farming can be isolating but through Fat Farmers we have seen people find their

community of like-minded people," he said.

Good Country Physiotherapy director Angela Willmore, who has been a driving force behind the establishment of Naracoorte

Fat Farmers just a few weeks ago, says she has seen firsthand plenty of farmers with declining fitness then injuring themselves.

Earlier in the year she and six physiotherapy students from the University of SA organised a health survey of local farmers and those in the ag industry, which showed there was interest in a group.

"As farmers there are so many things outside their control but their health is something they can control. We know the positive impact physical exercise and a healthy lifestyle has on reducing cardiovascular disease and so many other diseases as well as mental well being," she said.

The group meets every Friday morning at 7am at the Good Country Physiotherapy clinic for circuit of strength and conditioning training taken by physiotherapist Jasper Whitehead.

Ms Willmore says they plan to have the group is led by a personal trainer.

Kybybolite farmer Andrew Shepherd was among the first to sign up to Naracoorte Fat Farmers and is keen to

see it continue to grow.

"It is not that we are totally unfit but some of us could be doing more," he said.

"I don't look at it mainly for the fitness side of it, it is more about getting together as a group, learning different things and getting out of your comfort zone a little bit."

The Lucindale Fat Farmers group has also been going for a similar time with circuit sessions Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 6am at the BFit24 gym.

Sam Graetz - a director of local Nutrien merchandise branch Graetz and McVGrath Rural Services - owns the gym and says fitness is part of Fat Farmers but equally as important has been the camaradery formed between the 15 members, which range in age from their mid 30s to mid 60s. They have already formed a Whats App group, used to pick their play lists.

"The agricultural connection with Fat Farmers has made people feel more comfortable about coming along. It has broken down the barrier that a gym is all about lifting weights," he said.

■ Details: fatfarmers.com

Skillogalee successes already on show

BY CHELSEA ASHMEADE

■ From P1

Ms Thompson said they've worked hard on developing a mix of cover crop trials including the everlastings, and they now had a number of ground cover crop options.

As well as regular use of biodynamic 500 soil spray, she said working with Jared Murray at Watervale through his Green Living Permaculture to boost compost use across the vineyard was another exciting step.

Ms Thompson said it wasn't just "one thing" they

used or changed, it was a multitude of adjustments to get to where they are.

Another bonus they have noticed from adopting these management practices was fewer passes through the mid-row, which results in less compaction of the soils.

"We are the current custodians of this property and we take that role really seriously. We are making sure this land is in a better position for the future," she said.

Ms Thompson said the vineyards were all dry-grown, which gave them more reason to seek out the

EcoVineyards project.

To conduct the project, it was vital to have the support of Skillogalee's owners, the Clausen family.

"We have great support from Skillogalee's owner, Simon Clausen," she said.

"He is always keen to try something new. It's been exciting for the staff and everyone gets stuck in."

Better soil health, increased biodiversity and reduced mid-row interruption, is part of a plan to build excellence in their range of hand-crafted wines.

"The ultimate goal is

to make better wine," Ms Thompson said.

EcoVineyards gives growers access to new region-specific resources, regular events, the establishment of up to four demonstration sites in each participating wine region and access to Regional On-ground Coordinators to support growers.

The goal is to help future proof fruit quality, production and the resilience of Australian vineyards.

It is funded by Wine Australia with levies from Australia's grape growers and winemakers and match-

ing funds from the Australian government.

The program is delivered by Retallack Viticulture Pty Ltd with significant support from regional communities.

Retallack Viticulture managing director Mary Retallack said the program would demonstrate ways to create and maintain functional agroecosystems and enhance ecosystem services within Australian vineyards.

"By growing the resilience of vineyards using supplementary flora and enhancing soil health, it is possible to reduce the need for interven-

tion - saving valuable time and resources," she said.

"Ecological restoration provides habitat for beneficial fauna including predatory arthropods, microbats and insectivorous birds that contribute to biocontrol of insect pests in vineyards and is one of the key practices used to combat the effects of climate change.

"It is possible to boost functional diversity by more than three times when native insectary plants are incorporated near grapevines."

■ Details: ecovineyards.com.au



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