

For each conference we feature leading Australian farmers who share their stories, warts and all. They are always popular with our conference audience, and highlight the true value of 'farmers helping farmers'. We are pleased to share the incredible farming stories of David and Jenny Thompson and Brad and Katie Collins at our 2021 conference.

A flexible farming system

Turning challenges into opportunities

When a young Brad Collins moved from Sydney with his parents Garry and Jeannette to Poll Hereford Stud 'Ayrshire Park' near Wagga Wagga in the NSW Riverina district in the mid 1990s, their farming system was conventional and managed according to their agronomist's advice. This was based on the assumption the agronomist knew what they were doing and was making the best decisions for the farm.

Brad and Katie Collins featured in From the Ground Up #61, Winter 2020. We can't wait to hear how things are progressing on their farm!

Brad's wife Katie, who grew up on a farm near Albury, has a deep-rooted passion and love for the farming lifestyle but when she married Brad and they chose a life on the land, she says she had very little experience in the day to day business of running a farm.

More than 25 years down the track, after many twists and turns, they feel like they've finally found their feet.

The couple farm on 'Ayrshire Park' at Big Springs, 30 minutes southeast of Wagga. They run trading sheep stock in a cell grazing, multi-species pasture system, and have more recently introduced cattle on agistment.

"We moved home to 'Ayrshire Park' at the end of the millennium drought and it was totally bare," Brad says. "There wasn't a standing bit of grass on the whole place."

In 2009 Brad completed the Farming and Grazing for Profit course which opened his eyes to different ways of farming.



"I always listened to what the agronomist told me to do. He was making all the big decisions but he had no financial stake in what happened on the farm. Coming away from this course was a pivotal moment to realise we should be in control of the way we managed our farm," Brad says.

Although they took more control, Brad didn't change anything with the way he farmed. And their conventional cropping system with a self-replacing sheep flock was sending them to the wall.

Financial stress

In February 2014 a rural financial counsellor told them if they were still on the farm in September they had rocks in their heads and would be broke. Around the same time their youngest child started school and Katie was unsure how to fill her days.

The first step was attending the same Grazing and Farming for Profit course Brad had completed years earlier. Katie stepped into managing the farm and Brad says this is where the real story starts.

They didn't do things by halves and changed everything 'all at once'.

"Our biggest change happened between the ears. We went from a self-replacing sheep flock to lamb trading,

from conventional cropping to multi-species pasture cropping and from high synthetic inputs to none."

Katie says having a shared understanding of where they need to take the farm is the key.

Multi-species covers

Introducing multi-species warm and cool season covers has also played a role in finding a new balance.

When they sow more than eight species in grass paddocks, they're finding the plants are going to a whole new level quickly. They don't use fertiliser and dress their seeds with vermiculite, relying on the plants to help each other out.

This isn't happening as quickly on paddocks that have a hangover from chemical impacts or where the soils are taking longer to recover – but in general, the more species they have, the better the result.

Sharing knowledge

They love nothing more than people coming to visit their farm or having a chat and sharing what they're doing.

"There is a tremendous sense of camaraderie in regenerative circles. People get excited about what we're doing, we get excited about what they're doing. There's no-one trying to rip you off. People are trying to make a living for sure, but they're trying to make your situation and the world-wide situation much better than what it is," Brad says.

One aspect of VicNoTill which appeals is its approach of 'farmers helping farmers'.

"When you reveal your vulnerabilities and the things that haven't gone so well, nine times out of 10 there's someone sitting in the room who's had the same experience. When you speak out it helps them be comfortable in admitting they've had problems too," Brad says.

SNAPSHOT

Brad and Katie Collins

Ayrshire Park Big Springs NSW

Sheep and some cattle

Timed rotational grazing, trading stock only

Multi-species cover cropping, cool and warm season

No chemicals in system

Using vermiculture and worm castings



"It's important to surround yourself with others that accept even if something doesn't work, it's not a failure – it's just that you've figured out something you don't want to do the same way again."

When to move

Brad says the way they manage their livestock is not as time consuming as people might imagine. Getting their water supplies sorted has enabled them to fine-tune even more, but at the end of the day it's the animals who let them know when they're ready to move.

Their succession journey has shifted them both into a place of 'stewardship' with the perspective that in the short time they are here to manage the farm they have a responsibility to leave it in a much better place than when they took it on.

"It's so exciting to see the change in the country and see it responding to a different management style that encourages life and encourages nature to thrive."