

Shan and Shane Joyce have reaped the benefits of taking up sustainable farming methods on their property.

Shan Joyce DUKES PLAIN, QUEENSLAND

SHAN JOYCE FIRST began to question accepted wisdom back in the 1970s when, after she contracted rubella during her second pregnancy, she gave birth to a child with hearing, heart and sight defects.

"We were asking ourselves, 'Why us? Why our son?'" says Shan, now 60. "We began to question everything: what we ate, how we produced our food, the cleanliness of our water. It turned everything on its head."

That ability to challenge the status quo became the basis of a radical shift in farming practice for Shan and her husband, Shane, in the early '90s, when they realised that the pastures on their 7900-hectare Queensland cattle property, Dukes Plain, were too poor to sustain a viable business.

"The soils were depleted after years of overgrazing and erosion, and Shane and I both felt that to save the property, we had to change it."

That meant ditching the old, set grazing patterns and replacing them with rotational grazing – moving cattle between paddocks to allow pasture to rejuvenate – as well as improving the soil with their own organic fertiliser. "Shane developed a soil activator from organic materials on the farm and added it to the cattle's drinking water via a giant teabag made from shade cloth," says Shan. "The cattle distributed it in their dung."

Production is up, costs down and their soil is rich and erosion-resistant. Last year, the couple won the annual Soils For Life Carbon Cockey Award for sustainable agriculture. Soils For Life is chaired by former Governor-General, Major General Michael Jeffery (Retd).

"When it rains, the water soaks into the soil instead of disappearing in run-off," says Shan. "A healthy soil means healthy animals and healthy animals mean healthy people."



Saving THE farm

Drought, erosion, salinity, climate change and synthetic fertilisers are degrading farmland, **Michael Sheather** writes, but our farming women are helping turn the tide with nature.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALANA LANDBERRY

