

Planting for Sustainability



Project Snapshot

Farm Name:	Marlu Farms
Catchment Group:	South East Hyden Catchment Group
Rainfall:	325 mm
Soil Types:	80% medium, Salmon Gum, Mallee and Gimlet 20% sand over clay.
Farm Size:	5,500 hectares
Enterprise mix:	95% of the farm is used for growing wheat and sheep; some barley is grown on salt affected land. Land that is too saline for cereal crops is planted out with Saltbush which is now being grazed by sheep. Sheoak are also doing well on salt affected land.
Numbers Planted:	250,000 planted on the property.
Overall survival:	A 50% survival rate can be attributed to recent droughts, locusts and the planting of wrong tree varieties.

Their story

Mario Varone and his family started farming in SE Hyden in 1957. His father, one of the many Italian POW's of WW2, worked on a farm in the area between the years of 1943 and 1945. After the war ended, his host family nominated him and his eldest son to migrate in 1952. In 1957 they applied for land and by 1958 Mario, with his mother and elder brother, were able to join them. Together they cleared many virgin bush CP blocks. In 2002, after 45 years of farming under the partnership GA Varone & Co, the three brothers and their respective families split the farming operation.



Mario, Lucia and their family, now MARLU FARMS, run one third of the original 15,000 ha farm and in 2009 purchased a neighboring property. Their three daughters, two with Environmental Science degrees and the other with a Design & Advertising degree, all take a keen interest in the farm.

Mario and Lucia both enjoy broad acre farming with its mix of cropping and Merino dual-purpose sheep. They have a breeding flock of approximately 3,500 sheep and produce around 3,200 Merino lambs and 190 bales of wool each year. They also crop approximately 2,500ha of wheat and 300ha of barley.

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At the moment this land is planted with anything that will survive on it. This tree planting adds value adding through allowing sheep to graze the Saltbush. In the future money can potentially be made from the Sheoak, Mallee and Sandalwood.

With the help of two full time employees Mario finds time for his favourite pastime, gardening in his fruit orchard, olive grove and vegetable garden.



Mario's self made tree planter

1984: Tree planting contractors planted a mix of salt tolerant trees, shrubs and Saltbush. Varieties included; Flat-topped Yate, Swamp Mallet, Coastal Mort, Swamp Sheoak, Salt River Gum, Saltwater Paperbark, Golden Wreath Wattle, River Saltbush and Oldman Saltbush.

1988 – 89: Pine trees planted on 2ha areas of deep sand.

1990 – 2002: Most planting was done by hand; as sourcing a tree planter was always difficult, Mario built his own tree planter and it became a regular practice to plant 10,000 or more trees and bushes every year after seeding. They believed that it would help lower the water table, prevent erosion and if not, make the land look better than being left bare.

In the 2000 major flood, many of the non-suited varieties perished.

2002 – 2005: Saltbush, Sheoak and Pink-flowering Yellow Gum were the main varieties planted due to some of the earlier varieties starting to die, for example Coastal Mort.

2006 – 2007: The Saltland Pastures Association helped with the funding towards Saltbush seedlings and over 4,000 were planted. Greening Australia also supplied 5,000 Sheoak seedlings. Their daughter, a Science teacher at Emanuel Catholic College, and her CALM funded Bushrangers class traveled to the farm and planted some 3,000 trees.

2008: 500 Eyre's Green Saltbush plants from South Australia were planted and are doing very well.

2009: After purchasing the farm next door, a very bad patch of deep sand is being worked on. The 4,000 Oil Mallee planted were completely destroyed in a very bad windstorm.

2010: No trees could be planted due to very dry conditions.

2011: The purchase of a small 100hp tractor, with its many attachments, helps make planting easier. With funding from Wheatbelt NRM' Soil Conservation Incentive Program 5,800 mixed Sandalwood hosts and 2,000 Oil Mallees were planted on the same deep sand patch planted in 2009. 10,000 Saltbush were also planted and a better survival rate is hoped for.

The success in the Wheatbelt NRM 2010 Bushcare Grant Program has provided funding towards the fencing and revegetation of 84ha. This allows for a buffer to be established and the ability to connect small remnants and previously planted areas. 4kms of fencing has been completed.

2012: The very wet start to the year the sandalwood hosts have done very well enabling the Varones to plant the sandalwood seeds next to every second host. Planting 20,000 stems supplied by the Bushcare Program has been postponed until 2013.