



A piece of paradise close to Kaiapoi

SMART WATERING CASE STUDY: SUE BOWLES

Living off the land is Sue Bowles's passion and for the past few years reducing water consumption on her family's Waimakariri District lifestyle block has been a major part of her philosophy.

Key to making this work is the use of chippings as mulch to retain as much moisture in the soil as possible. "The big thing is we use chippings, rather than bark. Chippings have green leaves in it which add nutrients and microbes. Chippings take longer to break down than other mulches," she says.



Sue Bowles' property in the Waimakariri District

Sue, Dave, Daniel and Hayden have lived on their ten and a half acre block near Kaiapoi since 2005. When they arrived, there wasn't a lot of food production happening on-site but they've now established an orchard of 70 fruit trees, planted a field in potatoes and created several vegetable beds around their house that generate enough food to feed the family year round.

Excess fruit and vegetables are donated to Food Rescue, a group that supports families in need, or traded for different varieties via the Rangiora-based Food Exchange programme.

Learning to garden came to Sue in her 20s when she began flatting and starting growing tomatoes. Today she's a proponent of growing your own food for a range of reasons, and is strongly influenced by Paul Gautschi, the Back to Eden organic gardening guru who has an orchard that hasn't been irrigated for 20 plus years as it has a thick layer of chippings.

"It's a lost art, growing your own food, it's not valued enough. Plenty of people know that today's food is not what it's supposed to be, but they think it's too much work to grow their own. It's not as difficult as people believe."

Sue's goal is for the family to sustain themselves year round and pretty much they have achieved that. "We have enough potatoes and pumpkins all year and this year we had enough carrots as well. What we can't grow all year, we bottle, freeze or dehydrate."

With ten acres to maintain, reducing the workload is essential to keep their lifestyle achievable as both Sue and her husband also work off the property. Cutting down watering applications is part of this.

"I don't water heaps as I've been using more chippings in recent times. Mulch is like compost tea on the ground. As soon as it rains the nutrients that are lying there are collected and go straight back into the ground. Chippings are like a sponge. You can't see the water but it's there. When the roots of plants come in contact they just suck it up."

With thicker ground cover, Sue expects over time they will be able to drastically reduce how much water is needed in the vegetable gardens. The flower gardens no longer get irrigated anymore so this proves mulch works at retaining moisture through summer.

"I add water but as time goes by I will be watering less. When I do water, I use soaker hoses as much as I can. If you just put water where it's needed you'll get less weeds too. "



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The couple have even mulched the sides of their driveway this year to see if the edges dry out the same. She says Paul Gautschi describes mulch as like a skin on the earth. It retains water in the soil and suppresses weeds. Nature produces mulch naturally when autumn arrives and leaves fall to produce cover and nutrients for the earth. We should all be using more of it, says Sue.

As well as feeding her family natural food, Sue is passionate about promoting the benefits of gardening and says the hobby doesn't need to be all-consuming.

"I probably only work three to four hours a week on the food production side of our property. Once you start, you become addicted to being outside gardening."

"We should be encouraging people to garden. It gives us Vitamin D, it provides exercise; there are so many benefits."

While chipping mulch retains moisture, Sue's environmental and thrifty mind-set also encourages her to reduce water use.

"Because we're on a well it does motivate us to be careful with water. Water costs us so we don't use it willy-nilly. Our lawns don't get water and in time I would like to think our orchard won't need to be irrigated either. Last year we used less water than we've ever done because of mulching."

Sue believes we should all be looking at how to re-use water and the implications of our urban environments for water management.

"Wastage of water does worry me. We're wasting water everywhere when we could be collecting it in containers or swales to use in summer."

The couple have installed a series of wheelie bins around their home designed to capture rainwater and stormwater which is then re-used on parts of the property.

"We need to be encouraging people to do these things to keep the soil moist and help us all grow food. We've learnt from trial and error and it's been fun testing these theories.

The way the world is managing the land at the moment simply isn't working with soils getting drier and more depleted as time goes on. So we need to be looking at retaining rainwater more seriously."



Sue Bowles



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