Self-made: Nathan Blomeley has increased the size of his family’s operation at Pura Pura in the Western District threefold in the past four years. Picture: Yuri Kouzmin
PRACTICAL know-how and a relentless hunger to do things better has seen Nathan Blomeley grow his family farm threefold within four years.

The 27-year-old operates his family’s mixed cropping and sheep enterprise with wife Jessica, their son Riley, 2, and parents Tim and Danielle, at Pura Pura in Victoria’s Western District.

Since Nathan came home in 2014, the Blomeleys have tripled their farm size to 1209ha — a mixture of 865ha of their own country and 344ha of leased land.

The family has built up the business by purchasing and leasing land, contracting to pay for technologically-advanced machinery and using their practical skills to keep costs down. Nathan said they needed to do this to service the interest and principal of their debt, which they said was manageable.
Expansion mode: Nathan Blomeley with his parents Danielle and Tim on their farm.

It has been a rollercoaster ride for the Blomeleys since taking on the extra dirt. They hit two bad seasons, followed by an extraordinary year and then an average one.

This season they have 800ha of crop sown and Nathan contract sowed a further 800ha.

“We weren’t planning on doing so much contracting but we won’t say no to it while it keeps supporting the machinery we want and while we have scope to do it,” Nathan said.

Apart from shearing, Tim and Nathan do all the work themselves. Nathan’s brother, Josh, a builder at Ballarat, is also interested in farming in the longer term.
TIM, originally a shearer, and Danielle bought the 400ha family farm with the bulk of their income from off-farm. Danielle worked as a teacher and Tim, after shearing, was a contractor.

By 2014, when the 465ha original piece of land came on the market, the family decided to buy it back.

“When that land came up I knew the boys would want to have a go, so we put our necks on the line and bought it; we didn’t inherit a big farm without debt ... but that’s all they want to do,” Tim said.

With 100 per cent equity in the original 400ha, Nathan said the bank had confidence to back the expansion.

Focusing on timing and attention to detail is a big driver for the family. They have invested in upgrading to more technically-advanced machinery, with their contract work off farm “justifying” the purchases.

After school, Nathan worked with Bingham Harvesting for five years. “In Dad’s era everyone went shearing, now we all go driving,” he said.

Nathan said that experience taught him a great deal about cropping, machinery and exposed him to diverse systems and management.

“We worked for corporates and family farms, you see totally different mindsets,” he said.
Nathan found corporates generally had a "greater attention to detail" but also more available equity; they gave the crop all the inputs needed to maximise potential, used controlled traffic farming and employed the latest technology. He brought this approach home, and while Tim said they often bought gear second-hand, they strove to have technical tools to get the most from crops.

RIGHT GEAR

THE Blomeleys say they couldn’t justify upgrading machinery before the recent land expansion. “For 15 years we worked with a neighbour who had all the technology and I’d do all his stone work and spraying and for years no money changed hands,” Tim said.

Nathan said such relationships were vital. “Half of farming is about relationships, so you have to work with other people around you,” he said.

The first significant purchase was a Seed Hawk air seeder for more precise sowing. Using Southern Farming Systems trial data, they worked out that increased yields from the better machinery would mean the purchase could be paid off in two years.

“We’re growing bigger crops and have far better establishment, resulting in better water-use efficiency,” he said.
The Blomeleys have mapped their soils, which in turn has allowed for pH mapping and variable rate fertiliser application. Soil pH varies from 4.8 to 7.

Nathan said yield mapping showed a strong link to soil type.

“The country we’ve had for a long time had a good lime history so it needs very little now, but where we are leasing and the newer ground gets up to four tonnes/ha in a single application,” he said.

**MAXIMISING POTENTIAL**

THE Blomeleys say they “throw everything” in terms of inputs at the crops.

“Really an investment in inputs is not much and we are in a rainfall environment where we have got a lot of potential,” Nathan said.

With a sharp focus on soil fertility, Nathan said Olsen P levels were 20-35 on improved land but “as low as five to 10 on some of the fresh country”. The family used variable rate spreading of phosphate to help correct that.

“We sow with 100kg of MAP and 1 per cent zinc to the hectare,” he said. “Canola gets an application of sulphate of ammonia of 60-80kg/ha at the two to four-leaf stage. Canola and wheat soon after, at around four to six-leaf stage, get an upfront 150kg (/ha) of urea.
Nathan said their rotations were flexible but typically canola and wheat rotation in paddocks that need a lift or a double break to help control ryegrass they grow canola, then two years of wheat, followed by a pulse.

For wheat the target is 160 plants per metre square at establishment, but Nathan has been easing this off to avoid lodging crops. Depending if it is retained, fresh or hybrid seed, canola is
“We currently have a 40-foot (12.2m) seeder, 80-foot (24.4m) boomspray, we spread 80-foot (24.4m) and now we have a 40-foot (12.2m) header front,” he said. “Next year we’ll spread 120-foot (36.6m) and the next machinery upgrade will be a 120 foot boom.”

The Blomeleys normally receive about 525mm of rain a year with 325mm falling in the growing season. So far this year they have had 365mm, with a very dry September recording only 3.5mm.

FIELD POTENTIAL

THE Blomeleys are capable of achieving some impressive yields. In 2016, Nathan said their wheat averaged 8.5 tonnes/ha, and up to 11-12 tonnes/ha in some paddocks, while canola averaged 3.4 tonnes/ha.

Their five year average is 2.63 tonnes/ha for Wahoo and 650TT canola varieties (which has been replaced with Ignite), 4.82 tonnes/ha for APW Trojan and Beaufort feed wheat and three tonnes/ha for faba beans.

“Those averages are pretty fair, given the frosts and below-average rainfall in two years.”

Nathan said wheat cost about $500/ha to grow and canola $650/ha, which represented “more than 100 per cent return on investment”.

“We’re probably comparable to a lot of (progressive) farmers around here on ROI, but I think there’d be some old-school farmers that would spend two-thirds of that.
This year’s purchase of a new header would help the move towards a full CTF system. “We keep equity down in machinery by buying second-hand,” he said. Huge savings were also achieved by the father and son’s machinery servicing skills.

Sheep, which are more Tim’s passion, graze stony country unsuited to cropping. They have 1750 Merino and first-cross ewes joined to medium wool Bromley Park Merinos, Border Leicester and Poll Dorsets to run two self-replacing flocks and produce prime lambs.

The family say they work together well because they share a similar approach, but it is clear that a big driver of their success is that Nathan has been given increased responsibility.

“I refer to Nathan as the boss,” Danielle said. “And if anyone asks me anything, I say ask management,” Tim said.

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