

obsessed with another person, and by the fact that

instigator of a lot of pain, but it's my job

# How weeds and beetles saved the farm

## Country Calendar

Melenie Parkes

You don't often hear people singing the praises of the common weed but for Peter Barrett, "weeds are everything".

It was when Barrett began farming regeneratively at Linnburn Station that he quickly learnt the worth of this humble and much maligned plant.

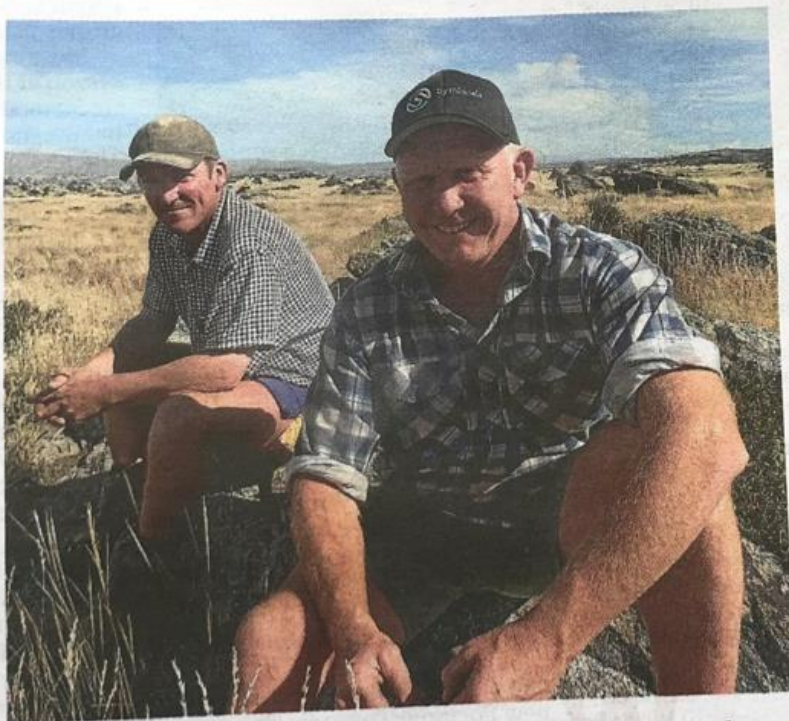
Linnburn Station has been in his family since 1954 and had been run using conventional farming practices. But when Barrett took over the large sheep and cattle station in Central Otago's Maniototo district in 2012, he thought there had to be a better way.

Research led to regenerative farming, which Barrett says is, "essentially trying to farm in the shadow of nature."

Those weeds, for example, can tell a story – if you're willing to listen.

"What we're first doing is going into the paddock and looking at the weeds and then going, 'OK, well, why are those weeds growing?'"

Barrett says weeds can be a great indicator of which nutrients are both abundant



and absent in the soil.

"We recognise that a weed grows because the biology in the ground has actually gone and said, 'I need you to grow because I need you to make me healthier.'"

Plants also play a vital role in the cultivation of the soil on Linnburn Station. The farm

operates a no-till policy and instead a diverse range of thoughtfully planted crops are left to do the job.

For Barrett, applying the principle that nature knows best is all important and that includes eliminating synthetic fertiliser, fungicides and pesticides.



Left, Gareth Findlayson and Peter Barrett on Linnburn Station. Above, Barrett's partner, Lisa Baines.

"The thing that people miss is that in soil there is bacteria, fungi, nematodes, protozoa, worms, lots of life, and they are all about allowing nutrients to cycle.

"If you get the bacteria and fungi working then, all of a sudden, you have resilience and so that's the whole idea. Instead of trying to take things out, it's about embracing life and trusting that the good will out-compete the bad."

Another important factor in this process is the symbiotic relationship between animals

and plants – each living organism has a role to play on the land. And one of the smallest critters on Linnburn Station works in tandem with the sheep and cattle.

Dung beetles are not native to New Zealand but they are endemic to North America and Europe, where New Zealand's first cattle came from. These insects take animal waste and cycle it back down into the soil.

"When they brought the livestock here, they didn't bring the dung beetles. So what we're trying to do is just balance that out by putting that back in the ground," says Barrett.

He believes regenerative farming is a flexible way of working the land. There's trial and error and an exchange of ideas.

"We're not taking anything off the table," he says. "But what it does mean is we're first and foremost trying to make sure that everything we do is for healthy soil. Because if we can get healthy soil and then healthy animals and healthy plants along the way, then we get healthy people."

Country Calendar, TVNZ 1, Sunday, April 19.