

JANUARY 2022 | AUSTRALIA COAST TO COAST

COUNTRY STYLE

*on summer
holidays*

ESCAPE THE
EVERYDAY

LAKE HOUSE

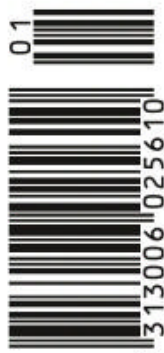
*A charming cottage
by the water*

DAYS IN THE SUN

CREATE A BEAUTIFUL
OUTDOOR ROOM



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THE SIMPLE LIFE A YOUNG FAMILY'S JOURNEY AROUND AUSTRALIA

where peonies grow

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER LED ONE TASSIE COUPLE TO PLANT PEONIES
ON THEIR FARM. TWO DECADES LATER, BUSINESS IS BLOOMING.

WORDS JESSICA BELLEF PHOTOGRAPHY MARNIE HAWSON



Belinda and Richard Weston with their border collie, Heston, at Weston Farm – the focal point of their working lives.

“PEOPLE ASK US WHAT WE DO, and I will often say we save marriages,” Tasmanian farmer Richard Weston quips. “Blokes get themselves into trouble and have to buy our peonies to make up for it!” Richard and his wife, Belinda, run Weston Farm, a seven-hectare lot located on rich alluvial flats near Brighton, just north of Hobart. “We were 24 when we bought the property and started this journey,” recalls the Tassie-born horticulturist and landscaper. “That was in 1992, and there was absolutely nothing here. It was a bare canvas... a field of dreams.”

The pair has since built a thriving business that supplies premium peonies, vegetables, fruit and herbs to restaurants, cafes and retailers all over Australia. The Weston Farm Produce range boasts an award-winning smoked paprika, as well as olive oil, honey, peony petal jelly and other flavoursome condiments.

In 2013, Richard and Belinda took ownership of the Pigeon Hole Cafe in Hobart, where the seasonal menu is directed by the farm’s yield, and lush peonies are bought by the armful. Richard may joke about selling bunches of flowers to men in the doghouse, but the truth is, Weston Farm’s produce reaches far and wide.

A bird’s-eye view of the property looks like a rectangular swatch of green-striped wallpaper settled onto a dry, straw-coloured surface. Rows of peonies meet with a grove of olive trees, while neatly gridded vegetable beds, clusters of outhouses and beehives sit by the homestead.

The house, the first addition to the land, was designed by Belinda, who works as a building designer when she isn’t running around on the farm or being a mum to the couple’s 20-year-old twin sons, Lloyd and Campbell.

In 1993, after living in their newly constructed home for six months, Richard and Belinda relocated to the Port Arthur Historic Site on the Tasman Peninsula, where Richard was employed to restore the gardens and grounds. A chance meeting with peony growers opened the Westons’ eyes to the possibility of creating their own peony farm. Upon returning to their rural property in 1998, they started work on the land in earnest.

Despite their exquisitely blousy appearance, the cool-climate-loving peonies are tough. “They are field-grown here, and they put up with the pretty strong >





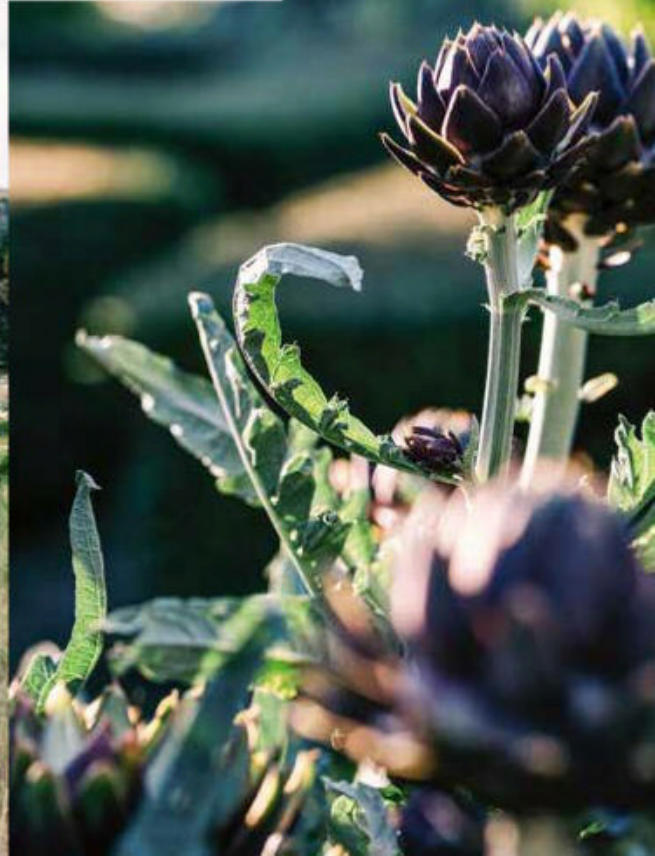
CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT

"We enjoy what we do. It keeps us in touch with the seasons," says Belinda; the farm is teeming with life; "Every season, you'll see something different on a flower, or a different insect or weather condition," says Richard; healthy pigs have space to roam on the farm; the peonies are a bestseller at the cafe; Richard greets the pigs; "The greater the diversity, the healthier the soil," Richard says.





CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Years of research and trials are about to come to fruition with Weston Farm's first commercial yield of European white asparagus, a rarity in Australia. "We like long-term things. You look at something like the peonies and the asparagus, and it tends to keep the cowboys out because it's not quick money," Richard says; the family's outdoor entertaining area; loyal Heston is always in tow; new artichokes; "Everything you see here today, we planted," Belinda says; romantic yellow roses; the roosters add colour and character to the farm.





winds,” Richard says. The flowering season is a short, joyful burst that runs from October to December. There’s heightened anticipation of a peony’s first flush.

“We always plant a crown with three to five eyes, and we won’t let them flower for the first few years. We de-bud, and that builds a nice, strong plant. We wait patiently and then harvest in the third year,” Belinda explains.

Richard adds: “There’s a saying that you’ve probably heard – ‘the first year they sleep, the second year they creep, and the third year they leap.’ And that’s how the peonies operate.”

Among the first blooms to roll off the paddock are the double-flowered Coral and Red Charms, and the glowing, lipstick-pink Paula Fay. In total, Weston Farm produces about 40 different peony varieties, and the size of the crop is growing. “We’ve had a big expansion in the last three years – we put in about another 8500 plants,” Richard says.

In the same paddock, you’ll find 600 olive trees that the couple started planting well over a decade ago. “Interestingly, with the olives and the peonies, they both require the same soil pH, so there was a correlation there in regards to what would grow,” Richard explains.

The vision for Weston Farm has always encapsulated organic farming principles and quality over quantity. “When you start small-scale farming, it’s got to be about diversification,” Richard says. “We had a good example this year, where we lost about 10 or 15 tonnes of olives to an unseasonal frost. The peonies can look good early in the season, but you can’t count your chickens before they hatch. You can’t rely on just one industry.”

For all the diversity they have nurtured and the intricate patchwork of tasks that make up their days, the Westons are driven by one simple thing. “There is a lot of joy out of growing things, and at the end of the day, that’s what it boils down to: a seed popping out of the ground,” says Richard. “It’s that connection with the earth and it gives you a lot of happiness.”

Belinda happily agrees, “It certainly grounds us, that’s for sure.” *CS*

For more information, visit westonfarm.com.au and pigeonholecafe.com.au