

Taranaki farmer likes the natural approach

Jo-Anne Huesser believes in taking a natural approach to life and has applied some of these philosophies to the way she runs the deer farm owned in partnership with husband Heinz.

The Huessers farm is on the outskirts of New Plymouth. Jo-Anne works on the farm with Heinz, who did all the fencing and farm set up. Heinz also works off farm for Swift Energy, an International Oil company based in New Plymouth. The couple have three sons; Simon (18), Aaron (12) and Andrew (6) and Jo-Anne says her appreciation of letting nature dictate life was further advanced when she joined the La Leche League, a breastfeeding support group, after having Simon nearly nineteen years ago.

Jo-Anne has been a La Leche Leader for seventeen of those years and has taken some of the group's philosophies and applied them to the way the couple farm their deer. "For example we don't wean our fawns. When the hinds go into the fawning paddock we take the yearlings off them then and the spikers and yearling hinds all go into the same paddocks and remain together. This means no drenching at all is needed as everything they need is in their mother's milk."

The Huessers have been farming in this way for 13 years and the practice has worked well with no health problems in their mob. "Our deer are in excellent health and are calm, relaxed and easy to handle," Jo-Anne says.

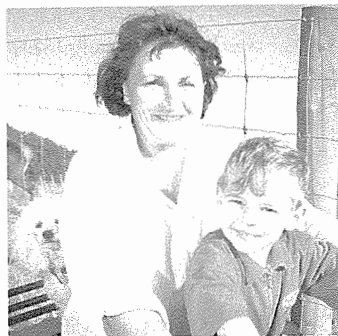
Heinz and Jo-Anne do not use any drugs on their deer apart from a local injection administered during velveting. Jo-Anne is certified for velvet removal and says this is the one process where drugs are essential.

Local vet Annie Tapper visits on a yearly basis for re-certification. She also checks on stock and so far they have had a clean bill of health. "If Annie had any concerns we would certainly take her advice and act on it, but so far so good.

"Our kill-out weights are right up there with the best as are our velvet weights. As there are no substantial vet and drug bills to pay, we are feeling that our natural-where-possible approach is working well. I keep records on everything which has been helpful over the years and these have now come out of boxes and into a spread sheet on my computer."

Jo-Anne and Heinz bought their first deer 17 years ago and went share farming with local man Tom Loveridge. They moved to Switzerland (Heinz's homeland) for a period before returning to New Zealand and buying their current property 'Twin Valley Deer' just over 13 years ago.

When they first took over the property they sprayed to control gorse and ragwort. Since then there has been little re-growth, but neither is a problem now and Jo-Anne says occasional spraying is all that will be needed in the future.



Jo-Anne says they are carrying 190 deer, which is more than usual, but they have enough feed. "We put Quin-Phos Bio-Grow on pastures the last couple of years and the results have been pleasing after mixed

results from liquid seaweed which gave us healthy animals but less hay in the shed."

Jo-Anne tries to keep stress levels down for her stock and this means reduced handling where possible. All weaning weights are recorded when the stag comes out early May so the hind and fawn are not handled unnecessarily by earlier weighing. When the stag does go out early February she adopts the same hands off policy and leaves the mobs alone. "All our fawning is completed well before Christmas so we are able to head off to Urenui Beach for three weeks of R&R. We pop home to check on the stock and, by not having to mess about with late fawners, moving the mobs, is easier. Our number of pregnant first fawners may be slightly reduced but this is more than offset by a good break that the whole family can enjoy."

While they are not certified organic, Heinz and Jo-Anne believe that a natural approach where possible is the best way to go.

And, if 190 deer is not enough the Huessers also have a small menagerie to take care of. This includes Polly the kuni-kuni, a donkey called Zippity, nine sheep, a couple of dozen hens, an aviary of love-birds and Cleo, the apricot toy poodle plus an extensive perennial flower garden the overflow of which is sold at their gate.

PostScript:

Jo-Anne, Heinz and their children have had a difficult year after Jo-Anne was diagnosed with bowel cancer late last year. She spent seven weeks in Palmerston North undergoing chemotherapy and radiotherapy and, after surgery in April this year, she has made a remarkable recovery. Jo-Anne, as the Taranaki Branch Chairperson, even managed to attend the Deer Farmers' Association (DFA) Conference in Wellington from 22-25 May.

She attributes her strong recovery to a positive attitude, support from family and friends and the higher dose of deer velvet she takes daily. "I believe the deer velvet contributed to my speedy recovery as I had none of the usual side effects from my operation and treatment. I'm now looking forward to getting back to full strength soon and resuming my normal routine around the farm." **S**