



The sheep whisperer



It's hard to pin a label on Jodi Roebuck. If we could find a single word it would so hyphenated it probably wouldn't fit on a business card - something like grazier-gardener-designer-teacher-guru, with sheep runner attached for a sub-title.

Sheep runner? Yes, literally, and not in the conventional meaning of the term. Sometimes, when Roebuck moves his flock to another property near the paradise valley where he and his family live on Hurford Rd just west of New Plymouth, he runs...and the sheep follow. You read that right – they run after him.

If you ask, he'll show you an aerial video of it, and it's a sight you don't usually associate with sheep farming: Roebuck is haring down the road and the sheep are chasing him, with nary a sheepdog in evidence.

He has a theory about this. It's what he and others in a growing alternative farming movement call "low-stress stock handling". He has a vision of it: "What I'd like to see in Taranaki is rewards to their farmers who can document or prove that they have low-stress stock handling. That's moving onto the paddock, moving onto the yard, onto the truck.

"That can be measured by flight zone...how close an animal comes to you. With a wild animal, they'll turn and take off well before get close. With my animals, my sheep will come this close (indicates less than a metre). They're not pets – they don't get a pat. But they trust me this much. When I move them with the trailer, they voluntarily just get on the trailer because they know we're going to the salad bar, we're going to the restaurant.

"So, I'd like to see rewards for farmers who can look after their animals."



When he shows us around the farm, Roebuck's sheep fulfill that vision, as if on some whispered command. As soon as he approaches the fence, they're up and moving towards him. If he claps, they run to him.

They seem to know he has something good in store, which may explain how he can get them to follow when he runs out to the road and down to a neighbouring property. Watch the video and you'll see. Shot from a drone, it got 15,000 hits the first day it went up on Facebook.

While it's obviously turned out to be a fine piece of online marketing, in fact it's merely the icing on a very complex cake, a farming and gardening philosophy that is both radical and fascinating.

It flies in the face of traditional farming practice, especially in a place like Taranaki, renowned as one of the world's most intensive dairying regions, a place where convention has ruled for generations.

Roebuck is gently challenging those conventions. He says he admires all farmers for their hard work, perseverance and innovation, and believes he has learned a lot from observing many of them here and overseas.

But he thinks it's time for a re-think, especially if we want to overcome issues created by practices considered by some to be destructive of the landscape and those who live on it.

The first thing you want to know about Jodi and Tanya Roebuck is how on earth they've come from conventional urban upbringings to be living almost completely off the land on a small farm, and applying alternative farming and gardening practices that have attracted attention from around the world.

Jodi Roebuck now spends three to four months of the year travelling to farms in New Zealand, Australia and the US, talking to graziers and gardeners about better ways to use their land.

Some of those devotees now come here to Roebuck Farm, where the couple has built a two-storey classroom and accommodation block beside their sheep paddocks, market gardens and greenhouses.

They come to hear Jodi and off-shore authorities share knowledge of a different approach to pasture and animal management, and the restoration of traditional seeds and growing methods.

Roebuck's background isn't in farming. He comes from a well-known New Plymouth family of builders, construction company operators and tradesmen. "I didn't want to follow the family tradition," he says.

"I was very much the black sheep. I did a lot of surfing, and went to art school." Taranaki Polytechnic, to be exact, where he specialised in design, but took a close interest in fine arts, as well.



That was how he met Tanya, who had come up to the polytech from hometown Whanganui to study art (she teaches it at high school to this day). Roebuck didn't go into the design world after graduating, largely because there were virtually no local jobs. Instead, he tried commercial orchard work for the next four years.

Then he and Tanya went somewhere that changed their lives – Kaiwaka, near Kaipara Harbour in the Far North – so Jodi could train with legendary heritage seed pioneer Kay Baxter at Koanga Gardens.

Now called the Koanga Institute, it has since relocated to Wairoa on the East Coast. Roebuck has maintained his connection to the present day, doing teaching sessions at Koanga and promoting its workshops on the Roebuck Farm website.

“I did an apprenticeship growing heritage seeds for two years, and the method of gardening they were using I really aligned with. That was the turning point for us.”

He explains: “There's another term – open pollinated seeds. The key thing is the seed grows true to type if you don't crop it. You're got to do your family planning, but if you have isolation for it, grow it by variety, it'll grow true, it'll grow the

same. All our great grand-parents cropped with open-pollinated seeds.

“The key thing is, and my message is, we're several generations separated from the old skills, the way it was. Everyone grew their own seed. There's a great element to the commercialisation of our agriculture - but it's also pretty destructive.

“It was pretty hard-hitting at Koanga. During my two-year apprenticeship, I became aware the world had lost 90 percent of open-pollinated seeds.

“The method Kay Baxter was using, called bio-intensive gardening, was formulated by an old actor called Alan Chadwick. John Jeavons was his student back in the early 60s.”

Alan Chadwick? John Jeavons? Now we start to get a picture of the influences that formulated Roebuck's world view.

Chadwick, who died in 1980, was an English master gardener who moved to the US. According to online sources, he was a leading innovator of organic farming techniques, and inspired what's known as the California Cuisine movement.

American John Jeavons wrote the primer on something called “sustainable bio-intensive mini-farming”, a book with the improbably long title of ‘How to Grow More Vegetables and Fruits, Nuts, Berries, Grains, and Other Crops Than You Ever Thought Possible On Less Land Than You Can Imagine’.

Jodi did a short course with Jeavons in Iowa, then landed a scholarship in 2003 to spend a seven-month growing season with him in California.

“I just refined a whole lot of things from there. We came back and we bought this property in Hurford Rd – nothing on it, not a tree or a fence, just gorse and hills.” His Uncle Keith Roebuck donated a beach cottage he owned in Hamblyn St overlooking East End Beach and the couple transported it to Hurford Rd to renovate as their new family home.

They started their first vegetable gardens, plots that have grown to become the foundation of a growing market garden business, with greenhouses being added to extend the growing season all year.

The farmlet (seven acres of hills enclosing a sun-drenched valley) was far from self-sustaining in

those early years. So, both worked at unrelated outside jobs, with spare time devoted to cultivation of heritage seeds, vegetables for sale to restaurants, and the beginnings of a sheep farming operation with a difference.

“At one point I was with NZ Post six mornings a week,” says Roebuck. “Then I worked for an architect.

“Since then I’ve been working for myself, just transitioning to a point where in the last three or four years everything I’m doing...it’s all very diverse...but it’s all agriculture-related.

“It’s still early days with the marketing of our seeds. This year we had a sabbatical year, and we’ve been developing our market garden and all the infrastructures.

“The exciting news is we can cross the old cultivars and stabilise them, and invent new varieties for the future.

“We’ve also lost the skill-set. And it’s not just in agriculture – it’s in the old joinery; you look at any kind of craft, sewing, fencing, right across the board.”

Gardening in traditional ways is one of the main thrusts of his teaching, but there is also another that has grown rapidly from what he learned during his travels and what’s transpired since he put theory into practice on their land.

Roebuck’s approach to grazing is very different to that seen on most Taranaki farms. He gives it a variety of names – “mob grazing” and “tall grass farming” are a couple.

What can he be talking about? An explanation begins with how they got into sheep farming. “We originally bought this property for cropping, then by default we had to start managing our outer acreage (the hills), so we began with animals, with sheep.”

They met a neighbouring farmer when their eldest daughter began school, “and that was it – we just got the farming bug pretty bad. We’ve been grazing now for eight or nine years, but really intensively the last seven years.”

There was another factor. They had been committed vegetarians for many years, but through



?? demonstrates one of Jodi Roebuck’s low-tech soil cultivating machines, a rotary appliance powered by battery. It’s one of the simple approaches he has imported from his overseas travels.

experience became convinced the family was healthier when animal fat and broth made from all parts of animals were included in their diet.

He began travelling overseas to teach gardening, which also gave opportunities to visit some of the best graziers in the world.

“I’ve been doing a lot of work in drier parts of the world, both teaching the gardening and visiting the graziers. I go to Victoria a lot, New South Wales, north California.” It fast-tracked his learning about a different way to manage pasture and animals. “We now teach grazing just as much as the gardening.”

He says the term “mob grazing” comes from what used to happen on the American prairie with the vast herds of roaming buffalo.

“In nature, the predator drives the ecology. For safety, the herbivores mob together and move regularly for food, and then there’s a long time before they come back. Birds follow the herbivores, and there’s quite a significant recovery period.”

This is where “tall grass farming” comes in. It means longer grass, much taller than the standard pasture on which New Zealand dairy cows and sheep are fed.

With that conventional approach, stock crop pasture much shorter. That can mean increased risk of diseases like facial eczema, and problems with stock wearing their teeth down.



Roebuck demonstrates “vertical pasture” – long grass where he will keep his sheep for only a day before moving them on. That ensures rich and rapid pasture regeneration and a surplus of feed.

If grass growth on the farm isn’t keeping up with the demands of rotation, stock are sustained with supplementary feeds like palm kernel expeller. To maintain big herds and flocks, farmers drill-plant grass seed and feed the ground with expensive fertiliser. They spray the weeds.

None of that is necessary, according to Roebuck and the people he has learned from. They’re saying stock should stay on a piece of ground only briefly – less than a day, even - so that surplus plant life is trampled with manure to facilitate rapid natural regrowth from seed already in the ground.

After three cycles of that, pasture growth is so spectacular that stocking density can actually be increased – with no need for artificial fertiliser, grass seeding replanting, or even weed spraying, since stock eat the weeds, as well (even thistle, says Roebuck).

He talks about a US grazer named Joel Salatin, a multi-generational American farmer, lecturer, and author whose books include ‘Folks, This Ain’t Normal; You Can Farm’ and ‘Salad Bar Beef’.

On his Polyface Farm in Swoope, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley, Salatin raises livestock for

direct sale to restaurants and other consumers, using “holistic management methods of animal husbandry, free of harmful chemicals”. He runs six times the stocking rate recommended by the US Department of Agriculture.

Roebuck: “Joel calls our current time the ‘regenerative era’. I’ve done a lot of work with Joel. He does some pretty neat grazing. He runs thousands of chickens three days behind the cows.

“Three days after the cows have put down their cow pats, the maggots are alive, and the chickens come in and they scratch the pats apart, eat the maggots, fertilise the paddocks themselves, and spread the fertiliser. So, he’s stacked a whole lot of function.

“If we did that here, we could have the biggest chicken industry in Australasia. We could get all those chickens out of the sheds and onto our farms. Even if we never sold an egg, it would still be worth doing just because of the sanitisation and the fertilisation.”

He says our agriculture has been over-doing things for a hundred years. “There’s very little recovery period before stock is brought back onto pastures.



A seed-planter that's now saving a lot of time in the market garden.

The more disturbance you apply, the greater the recovery time you leave. The longer the recovery period means we're doing much better things for our landscape.

"Salatin calls it 'deep massage'. If you deep pug out a field and you stay off it, you've just deep massaged it. There's hundreds of years of seed in the ground – to go out and drill in more seed is just ridiculous."

He says some people become confused when he talks about how he applies this approach to his own farm and properties he leases.

"They say that we've got a longer recovery period so we must need more acreage. But no, hang on – we've got a longer recovery period, but we've got more growing vertically on our farm.

"We've got our animals bunched in a small space for a short time, we've got more food going in the mouth, we've got more fertility coming out the back end. And they're only there one day, and then they're off.

"The way to increase your stocking rate – that's animals to the acre – is to increase your stocking density, which is body weight per acre.

"So, as you tighten your animals up and you put them on to more food...and think of the big mob,

nature's big pattern...they begin non-selective grazing.

"That means instead of just picking on the favourite plants and eroding them – which means you've got to replant them and fertilise them – they eat everything.

"You have a management tool where you don't have to spray anything, you don't need to poison anything.

"They literally start eating things they never used to eat; they socialise well; they like being close, and they move easily because you're moving them all the time.

"You need more animals not fewer. You have the ability to trample surplus grass, and this is how we generate our organic matter. What stock don't eat they step on and push it into the ground.

"For every blade of grass they knock down, two more will come up. Your pastures thicken. There's never any bare ground. And it's just like mulching – you're mulching the landscape behind you.

"That's how we build organic matter above ground. And below ground. What you've got above ground, you've also got below ground, so you've got a bigger root system, which means you've got more of a buffer during drought, during heavy rain."

He says the farming industry believes a sheep should graze between two and five centimetres of grass.

"If you are, then you're going to need a veterinarian, soluble fertiliser, and you're going to need to drill more seed, and you're going to need to buy more hay.

"Every time we sever the grass, the roots die back to compensate, and then as they grow, that pulsing is building huge amounts of organic matter underground and above ground with the trample.

"So, we're literally farming on a surplus, and we're giving back all the time, and we're leaving more behind us as a residual than New Zealand's farming on."

A concession Roebuck readily makes is the method described above has so far been applied mainly to large sheep and beef cattle stations in dry climates like Australia and the American Mid-West.

They're mainly the ones he's visited, where he's seen the approach working well. However, he has now begun consulting for sheep farms on the East Coast of the North Island, and believes it would work there, as well.

What he's seen on the East Coast concerns him. For example, one large sheep farm he visited spends \$60,000 a year on fertiliser mainly, he believes, because they allow sheep to keep pastures down to golf course length.

"If they spent half that sum on another staff member to move their stock around much more, they wouldn't need to spend all that money on fertiliser."

While the farmer's wife was keen, her husband was worried about taking what seemed a radical step away from convention. It's an attitude that prevails, although Roebuck knows a few examples of people who've started to change.

"I've got a local friend, Matt Denson, who runs 300 sheep on other people's land. He used to be the same – conventional, got the sheep to chew it out, put on the fert. We've worked closely over the years. He's lengthened his grasses and his rotations, and now he's drenching less, he's got more grass, he's got more animals."

The sheep on Roebuck's farm are testament to the effectiveness of what's being proposed, albeit on a small scale. He says farmers who call in for a look are amazed at how healthy and relaxed his animals have become.

And how good their teeth are. "That's something that happens when sheep farmers graze to the roots – most sheep lose their teeth in a few years. Ours keep them until they're much older. The long grass means they're not wearing them out."

So, this question: would mob grazing/vertical pasture work here on Taranaki dairy farms? He believes so, although it might need farms to carry dry stock, perhaps as many as half the total herd.

"The challenge with dairy is they're exporting so much off the farm. I don't know if I'm right or wrong, but my gut feeling is that a sustainable dairy farm using this approach would also involve dry stock. Because the dry stock cattle aren't being milked, you can run them lean while they improve your pastures and they'll still put on weight. You can run them one rotation ahead, and they can trample your surplus, and do your pasture improvement, and the dairy cows can really benefit from that."

How does the traditional industry in New Zealand regard him - as eccentric perhaps?

Roebuck: "No. We opened up for the garden festival twice and I show-cased all the grazing and I timed all my grass right next to the gardens, and we had all the farmers come to check us out, in their overalls. And they totally get it."

"One farmer summarised what we're doing in one sentence. He said: 'So, basically you're farming on a surplus.' That's exactly it. They're managing the same things as us – pasture and herbivores; they get it."

"I've got a bunch of leases I graze, and one of them has got a beautiful valley. I took my dairy farming and sheep shearing friends up there, and I said I've got opportunities to graze here, although there's no fencing. They said the land was hungry and would be a lot of work."

"I grazed it three times in the first year with high stocking density. The first paddock just exploded, with the broadleaf in there. There was a hill that had been broken with the cows and it had all started to come back with gorse."

"That hill, I had one day's grazing for 90 ewes; I now have two and a half days' grazing for 90 ewes on that same hill, just through managing the pasture."

What about the people he deals with overseas – how do they feel about him? Could we talk to someone?

Yes, says Roebuck, and recommends Bruce Davison (**left**), a soil scientist and farmer in New South Wales, who runs up to 400 head of cattle, as well as goats, on a rain-starved 5000-acre spread. Davison is full of praise.

"Jodi brings a great deal of enthusiasm, and delivers training he has learned and expanded on from holistic management



practitioners, cover croppers, market gardeners, and his specialty, bio-intensive gardening's John Jeavons."

Can people like him and Jodi be rightly considered pioneers in such a revolution? Davison: "No. While we may be considered leading locally with uptake of new methods, the pioneers are people like Colin Seis here in Australia and Gabe Brown in the US.

"I would consider Jodi and myself early adopters and perhaps leading in the delivery/training of these new methods and knowledge.

"Change has always come very slowly. While a great deal is happening regarding learning new ways to build soil fertility and grow crops, uptake by the majority of the farming community is historically slow."

And if the message is ignored? "Land will continue to degrade and it will become increasingly difficult to produce from that land. With a growing population, that's not a recipe for a bright future. The world is losing on average one percent of its soil annually. That cannot continue without consequences."

So, big picture stuff: if the whole of Taranaki adopted his form of grazing, what would it mean for the economy?

"Firstly, you need to appreciate that it's not my way of grazing – it's something that a lot of others have done, especially the beef graziers," he says. "It's been well-documented. I'm going to write my

own book on grazing sheep, because there's nothing written on it. But I could lend you two dozen books on this method of grazing beef.

"My vision...what I'd like to see in Taranaki, as I've said, is rewards for farmers who can demonstrate low-stress stock handling. I'd like to see rewards to people who have more recovery time in their pasture, and tighter stocking densities. I started with sheep, but nothing pleases me more now than a big mob of any herbivores that's run tight.

"I'd like to see more relationships made; no youth can afford to buy a farm now. Joel Salatin has a saying – if the aged farmer can't get out, the young can't get in.

"If we can get a youthful, energetic, next-generation person on the landscape beside an aged farmer, then suddenly we've got relationships happening, and we haven't got old, lonely farmers.

"I'd like to see more people stacking enterprises – chickens following cows is just one example. We also need to focus on re-mineralising our soils. The minerals aren't in our soils and not enough in our vegetables. I'm not a soil scientist, but most of the trace elements are pretty depleted.

"The irony is that with regenerative agriculture we can actually farm or market-garden and improve our landscape as we are farming, and that's the basic premise with us.

"I think Taranaki could be the global beacon for non-brittle (wet climate) grazing. Huge potential. I'm not saying: 'Stop it all over-night, stop your fertilisers, your palm kernel.' But I think if we





Tanya Roebuck helping stretch mozzarella during David Asher's natural cheese-making workshop at the farm in February. *Photo: Isabella Doherty*

beauty of what I do. Without diversifying too quickly, we've got enough on the go now that if one thing's low, another thing's up."

There's plenty of people who want to hear Roebuck's message, and he's enjoyed fully developing his role as an instructor.

"Having never even been on stage during school, I found suddenly through agriculture I'm presenting to the world.

"I'm quite often talking in front of hundreds of people, and I've found that really easy."

For example, he works with an Australian company called Milkwood Permaculture, whose web presence has 70,000 followers, with 30,000 looking at weekly blog posts.

transitioned...I'd rather see people farming with fewer inputs.

"We hit the wall, then we have a think about it, and then we make change, and the change is the succession that we're seeing.

"Take Greg Judy in Missouri, for instance – it got so bad he sold everything off the farm, except for the dirt. And he's built himself up by grazing on other people's properties. He now owns three farms, grazes seven...big beaming smile, his life's awesome.

"Maybe we're already there. Dairy's pretty tough."

A term he uses occasionally is "holistic" management. "There's a lot of other names...but with holistic management the first thing you do is make a statement about what quality of life you want to live - that's just about unheard-of in farming.

"You design everything around that. So, you pay yourself first before you pay the farm. I like to feel that quality of life comes from being able to make your own decisions.

"I think a lot of the time the farmers feel they're not able to make their own decisions. That's the

Curtis Stone, a British Columbia market gardener calling himself the Urban Farmer, comes and teaches at Roebuck Farm.

"He's got nearly 100,000 followers on YouTube, who pay him. He's buying out his neighbours' backyards and using them for market gardening to supply restaurants.

"I think it's a sign of the future that he can buy back urban sprawl with his agriculture. He's literally buying his neighbours' properties, renting the houses out with Air B&B, and carrying out agriculture on the land."

The internet has been a crucial aide to spreading the message. "We're networking lots, and social media is a positive tool, a fantastic tool. But it's how you use it. We've got thousands of people round the world following us and inviting us to go and work and go teaching."

And he's just as enthusiastic about what's happening at home. "It's probably one of the fastest-growing movements in the world, especially in dry climates. But I'm excited about grazing for Taranaki, too. I want to be farmers' friends - I don't want them to think I'm radical or it's hocus pocus.