

PAYING PEANUTS

WET TROPICS GROWERS TURN TO PEANUTS FOR CASH COVER CROP

Mossman's Glen, Scott and Michael Fasano are among the growers in the far north turning to peanut fallow crops as they work to improve soil health and reduce fertiliser use while developing a new income stream.



The trio harvested their first peanut crop in June and say the results have been encouraging.

"They're a hardy plant, once you get the seeds to germinate they'll grow in our loose sandy soils and they can handle rain and being in water in the low spots at that stage," Scott Fasano said.

"For us it's about getting more organic matter into our soils and breaking the monoculture so if we can do that while also making some money it's a win-win situation."

The Fasanos and another new peanut grower, Gordonvale cane farmer HJ Way, said a wet start to the growing season had been challenging, as had the learning curve.

His planting was delayed until March because of the rain.

"I won't be leaving it that late again," he said. "We had a lot of issues, learned a lot and I'm ready to try again next year at an earlier time and using a few different breeds."



"These days I can dig in the soil and find worms again. Fertiliser use has reduced to 120-130 units of nitrogen per hectare and the yield has stayed about the same."

"We've grown fallow crops, mainly cow peas, for the last 10 years for their soil health benefits.

"These days I can dig in the soil and find worms again. Fertiliser use has reduced to 120-130 units of nitrogen per hectare and the yield has stayed about the same.

"So to find a cover crop that can also be a cash crop ... it's worth the extra work to give it a go."

Aloomba's Paul Rossi is one of the few Wet Tropics cane farmers to have produced peanut cash crops for many years.

He says the benefits to soil health and his income have made peanuts a fixture in farm management plans since switching from cow peas and beans 16 years ago.

"It was part of a bigger change, with the move to wider 1.8m rows and controlled traffic three years later," he said.

"Peanuts have helped with damaging nematodes. Counts over the years have shown we've almost wiped them out.

Continues page 14 ►



Pictured: (left) CANEGROWERS Mossman Chairman Glen Fasano (centre) with sons Scott and Michael; (above) Aloomba grower Paul Rossi swapped cow peas for peanuts 16 years ago.



Pictured: Gordonvale cane farmer HJ Way is ready to give peanut fallows another go after encountering some difficulties first time around.

"You can barely pick them up in the peanut fallow now."

He uses 130 units of nitrogen per hectare on his ratoons but only 65 units on plant following a peanut crop. He's seen no reduction in yield or sugar as a result.

"The nitrogen benefits, like other legumes, are reasonable in peanuts even though you harvest them," Paul Rossi said.

"I've trialled zero and 65 units of nitrogen in six-row strips across a block after peanut fallow and the results came back

no different, so where I can I'll replicate that now in blocks with a uniform peanut canopy."

He says diligence and the right soils were crucial to success with peanut fallow crops.

"You need friable soils and you've got to be onto it for about 20 weeks from planting to harvest.

"There is regular spraying and I'm constantly putting on minute amounts of trace elements.

"This year we had a lot of grubs and the rain led to poor germination and a less successful crop but it's been a while since a year like that."

Michael Waring, WTSIP's Regional Extension Support Officer, said fallow cover crops benefit soil structure by improving organic matter and biological diversity in the soil.

"Better soil structure improves plant available water and allows soil to drain more freely, which reduces water logging," he said. ■

Article supplied by Wet Tropic Sugar Industry Partnership (WTSIP).

