



ABOVE: Anne and Shane O'Neil (Photo: Dan Paris)

# Yirri Grove; olives and value-adding to produce an income from a small property

*From a background in the building and construction industry, Anne and Shane O'Neil sought out a sea-change where they could pursue their ambitions to live off the land and grow their own produce. Their investment in an Esperance small landholding was bursting with olives and opportunity.*

## Introduction

The past eight years have been an exciting, busy and rewarding time for Anne and Shane O'Neil who have gone from not knowing anything about olives, to being awarded Bronze at the Perth Royal Show for three years in a row. All of this was made possible through their investment in a small property on the outskirts of Esperance on which an olive orchard was newly planted. The original aim at Yirri Grove was for the property and business to provide the main income for the O'Neills, a goal which has been a key driver in their determination to succeed. Now with the production of certified extra virgin olive oil (EVOO), table olives, meals and other value-added products through their farm shop and café, their goals are being achieved.

This case study traces the evolution and growth of Yirri Grove, its current management, as well as the experiences and the lessons learnt along the way. Through information provided by Yirri Grove's Anne O'Neil, this case study also provides an insight into the importance of business and property planning for small landholders.

## Focus Area

Yirri Grove is a 25 hectare small landholding located just a short drive out of Esperance, Western Australia.

The area exhibits a 600mm rainfall and Mediterranean style climate (wet cool winters and warm dry summers), which is ideal for olive production. The property is elevated, meaning it is not prone to waterlogging and flooding, and the soils are predominantly deep sands over limestone.

The Shire of Esperance is located on Western Australia's southeast coast, about 725 kilometres from Perth by road. With a population of just over 14,000, the Shire has one of the lowest population densities to be found anywhere. The environmental and agricultural aspects of the Shire are a significant part of its heritage, values and identity.

Agriculture is the predominant land use with broad acre agriculture specifically contributing significantly to the region's economy and being the largest employment industry (GEDC, 2016).

In more recent years, there is an increasing trend for small landholdings (properties under 100 hectares), such as Yirri Grove, with the Shire now having proportionally more individual small landholders than broad acre farmers. These small landholdings are generally located within a 30 to 50 kilometre radius of the town of Esperance and are within the catchments of internationally renowned, and highly valued environmental assets, such as Lake Warden.



ABOVE: Yirri Grove from the air (Photo: Anne and Shane O'Neil)

## Evolution & Growth

For Anne and Shane O'Neil, the impetus for change after toiling in the Goldfields for many years in the construction industry, was the advent of grandchildren. Both Anne and Shane were originally from farming families themselves and they felt a desire to show their grandchildren that you can live in the country and grow your own food, something she feels their own children missed out on.

When the decision was made to sell their business, the search began to find the sea-change property, somewhere where they could "chill out". While they had a wide arc to choose from, Esperance was an attractive location, with its relatively closer proximity for Shane to initially commute to and from the Goldfields. After looking for 12 months, they purchased Yirri Grove in 2008. At that time Yirri Grove had a liveable cottage, water, power and a newly planted olive orchard.

Through their research to date, the O'Neills' have identified that the name Yirri is an Aboriginal name from New South Wales, meaning "home". Anne reflects that as an English immigrant, in her childhood there was the family farm which provided a sense of "home", and that whilst she has lived all over the Western Australia, it is now that she truly feels at "home" at Yirri Grove.

The five hectare orchard (one fifth of the property size) was planted in 2000 by the previous owners with 1,000 olive trees, which included frantoio, Kalamata, manzanillo and barnea varieties. Water supply and irrigation was set up for establishment of the grove.

After purchase, Anne had hundreds of ideas about what to do at Yirri Grove. Anne reflects that "we knew nothing about olives" but with a ready asset, the O'Neills' set about researching the opportunities. In 2009 they attended the Australian Olive Expo, and from there they could see that everything was going to fall into place in pursuing a business venture from the olive orchard at Yirri Grove. Everything was there to make it work (ie: olive trees, water and climate) and so the planning began.

Ann reflects that it is "really important to have plans." From their background in construction, the O'Neills' knew the importance of planning and their skills in that area were invaluable. Having a small landholding and producing an income from it is "like building a house" Anne states. The plans allow you to see what is next and are also there to look back on at any stage. When they took over the property, the plan for the olive grove was provided to them as a piece of paper torn out of diary with letters all over it. Anne and Shane were able to successfully identify that the letters were the code for

## KEY MESSAGES

1. Planning is very important. It provides the structure for your project to succeed and is something you can use to look back on to monitor and evaluate your property and businesses progress.
2. Research your ideas well and develop networks with other growers and producers in your areas of interest.
3. Look for opportunities to value-add to your base product to diversify your income.
4. Know when to get help, be it for completing applications or to undertake practical hands on work.

the variety of each of the olive trees in the grove.

In further developing their plan to produce EVOO and table olives as a business venture, the O'Neill's found that there was a huge amount of support in the olive industry for growers. Anne and Shane became members of the Australian Olive Association and started making contacts. One particular contact was Julie Lloyd of Eagle Bay Olives in Dunsborough, whom Anne visited to research the olive and value-adding opportunities.

With the nearest olive press located at York, WA, the O'Neill's decided that they had to process their own oil. Through their research at the Australian Olive Expo, they identified suppliers and importers and had their press custom made in Italy. That in itself was a story, with the press travelling from Italy to South Australia, Perth and then on to Esperance where it sat at the Horizon Power depot until local connections allowed it to be delivered to its new home at Yirri Grove. The press is a stainless steel modern centrifuge and is one of the smaller commercial olive press sizes.

The purchase of the press meant that they needed a purpose built "small commercial" building to house the press and facilities for processing. The O'Neill's embarked on the building process with the Yirri Grove processing shed being completed in 2012, ready for machinery.

In 2012 the first EVOO was produced at Yirri Grove with the oil being sent to the testing laboratories at the Department of Primary Industries in Wagga Wagga, NSW, for Australian EVOO certification. They achieved this certification in 2012 but failed in 2013 due to a wet year.

The stainless steel press at Yirri Grove can process 80 kilograms per hour, allowing for 0.5 tonne per day. Yirri Grove only undertakes the first press (extra virgin) and bottles on-site.

After the processing building was completed, the

O'Neill's sought to further value-add to their enterprises. At that time, Anne was aware that there were no other on-farm shops and restaurants within the Esperance region and with inspiration from her research into similar ventures, the O'Neills' saw the opportunity to diversify their income through the creation of a farm shop and café. The farm shop and kitchen were added on to the processing building, with fitout completed and doors opened to the public in December 2014. The shop was, and is now, open Friday to Monday (including Public Holidays) from 10.00am to 4.00pm. Anne reflects that while the shop was not initially part of the plan, it was an obvious opportunity which became a part of the plan. Planning is an ongoing cyclical process: plan, do, review.

While the O'Neill's have undertaken numerous works themselves, they have contracted the skills and expertise of electricians, plumbers and drafters for the building plans. Anne found the building applications process very tedious, however necessary.

Like all land, no matter the size, the land management at Yirri Grove is ongoing. Complementing the Yirri Grove business plan is a property plan which incorporates:

- Public access to and around the property and olive grove, as well as exclusion areas,
- Signage,
- Shelter and wind breaks,
- Soil health management activities (Note: See A guide to soil sampling for small landholders in the Shire of Esperance),
- Location of facilities (including a landing strip), and
- Water facilities and management (ie: drainage).

Anne reflects on the most memorable moments of their experiences being the first day that they made olive oil and then the day that the farm shop opened.



ABOVE: Construction of the farm shop and processing plant (Photo: Anne and Shane O'Neil)

***“We think we own the properties but we never really do. We are caretakers; someone else will come after us. We are not here forever, so you have to be able to hand it over.” Anne O’Neill, 2016.***

## **Current Management**

### **Production and customers**

In 2016, Yirri Grove harvested 10 tonne of olives, producing 2.5 tonne of EVOO. Anne O’Neill comments that the greatest joy of the harvest season is the community involvement. Yirri Grove also processes and bottles EVOO for eight to 10 other growers, with Yirri Grove being the only processor in the region. In providing this value-adding service, Anne considers it has been a two-way street and acknowledges that they have learnt a lot from other olive growers in the Esperance community.

The farm shop sells a range of Yirri Grove EVOO products and table olives, as well as jams, relishes, dukkah, local craft, local books and framed local photography. From the shops kitchen, Yirri Grove serves gourmet lunches and morning and afternoon tea, utilising whatever produce is in season in the garden to compliment the menu. They aim to provide a truly paddock to plate experience and Anne emphasises that it is “fresh food, so you can’t go wrong”.

Up until this stage, most customers are local, or are visitors linked to locals. Yirri Grove does not get a lot of passing traffic which Anne admits is a challenge.

From a financial perspective, after investing in the infrastructure and equipment, Yirri Grove has broken even in the last two years and is now poised to realise the profits of their hard work.

### **Certifications and Registrations**

Yirri Grove holds the following certifications and registrations for the business:

- Australian Extra Virgin Olive Oil certification,
- GST registration,
- Business name registration, and
- Membership of various clubs and associations, including the Esperance Chamber of Commerce.

Yirri Grove has consistently attained EVOO certification since 2014 and Anne remarks “we are getting better at it”. While Anne admits that certifications, registrations and memberships are very important, she feels that these have to be kept at a realistic level for a small business.



ABOVE: The Yirri Grove Logo



ABOVE: The Yirri Grove Stall at the Esperance Growers Markets in 2012 (Photo: Anne and Shane O’Neil)



ABOVE: Award winning olive oil from Yirri Grove (Photo: Dan Paris)

## Marketing and Promotion

**Brand:** Anne drew up the Yirri Grove logo design initially and utilised local sign writers for signage. The pink colouring of the logo reflects Anne's feminine touch with olives an obvious inclusion. Anne feels that the name Yirri stands out and is original.

**Advertising and online presence:** 2016 has seen Anne link all of Yirri Grove's advertising into a marketing plan utilising Facebook (over 1,500 likes as of September 2016), Instagram, launching the Yirri Grove website (this was outsourced to a local business through networks made at the Esperance Growers' Markets), print advertising and entering competitions and shows. Yirri Grove's digital presence allows Anne to utilise her passion for photography in showcasing the property, the product, the shop and the region.

**Growers Markets:** Anne was one of the first to join the Esperance Growers' Markets (EGM) when it was outside the local IGA. At that stage, the EGM represented a particularly important avenue for sales because it was before the farm shop opened. In 2015, Anne was part of an instrumental team of people who revived the EGM and she reflects that the EGM are a "great place to test product and to have face to face interaction with your customers"

(NOTE: see The Esperance Growers' Markets; more than just fresh, local produce).

**Shows and Awards:** Participating in shows and competitions brings credence to a brand and can allow labels to stand out. Yirri Grove started entering competitions in 2014. The brand had success in the Perth Royal Extra Virgin Olive Oil competition achieving Bronze in 2014, 2015 and 2016, and in 2016 were only two points away from attaining silver. In 2015 Yirri Grove entered the Australian National EVOO Competition and was awarded a Bronze.

Further to industry recognition for their product, Yirri Grove was nominated in 2015 and 2016 and was a finalist in 2016 in the Esperance Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Business Excellence Awards in Best Micro Business and Best New Business categories.

**Monitoring and evaluation:** Anne comments that in order to monitor what is happening in your business and to assess if you are achieving your goals, you "have to stand back and look". Yirri Grove monitors their success through financial performance, winning awards, yields and smiles! They then adjust their operations and projects as required.

**Shop Front and tourism:** The shop front provides a tourist attraction for locals and visitors alike. The O'Neill's attribute their skills in this area as having come from life experiences. Anne feels that a friendly welcome is key in dealing with customers. Facebook reviews indicate a positive experience by customers.

## Challenges and learnings

In building their small landholding into a productive and commercial venture, Anne reflects on the challenges:

- Building permit; this was the biggest challenges in terms of paperwork and planning requirements. Their experiences in construction helped them negotiate through the process.
- Harvesting; although it is a very enjoyable time, the pressure is on to secure the harvest.
- Day to day running of the restaurant; Anne remarks that "staff and delegation are important".
- Balancing the financial and time investments with making the profits.
- Land management; wind and rabbits are identified production and environmental issues. Yirri Grove was part of Lake Warden catchment project and received funding to install wind breaks. Rabbits presented a problem during the revegetation process and are an ongoing issue in the catchment.
- Managing time; Anne has now grown to appreciate that "If it gets done, it gets done. Just do the best that you can." Anne again feels that it is critical to plan the time commitments at Yirri Grove.

On reflection of their small landholder journey, Anne feels that they have obviously learnt a lot about olives, but also how to be patient and how to get along. She feels that it has been a personal growing journey. "Ultimately you have to be responsible for your own actions" Anne says, "you want to push something to get the most out of it, but you also need to know when to hold back".

## Advice to small landholders

Anne highly recommends running your own business from a small landholding. At Yirri Grove they make the products that make the business, and they have then acted on opportunity to value-add to the base product of olives to diversify their income. Anne has found the self-satisfaction very rewarding.

Through their experiences and ongoing management of the business and land at Yirri Grove, Anne provides the following advice to small landholders contemplating utilising their land to produce an income:

- "Do your homework",
- "Make plans before committing",
- "Get as much information as you possibly can; research it!",
- "For your monetary budget, double it!",
- "Adjust as you go" (ie: monitor and evaluate),
- "Be prepared for the building permit applications process", and
- "Outsource where you identify you do not have the required skills or time".

## The Future for Yirri Grove

When asked about what is next at Yirri Grove, Anne admits that “this is fine”. “You do have to push to make a plan come to life and it is hard work but we are on-track” Anne says.

Anne feels that the orchard is already supplying enough oil and that Yirri Grove can source olives off farm to supplement any future need, so there are no plans to increase the size of the orchard. Anne is now focused on looking outside of the grove to further value-add to their existing enterprises. She would like to be more productive in the garden to supplement the shop kitchen. She is also very keen to further develop the fresh local-food component of their business, and the region at large, and to invest more time in local hand-made goods for the farm shop.

The Yirri Grove networks continue to grow and in 2016, Yirri Grove oil has been sent to Italy for testing and comparison. Watch this space!

## Acknowledgements

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## References

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## Other resources in this series

- The Esperance Growers’ Markets; more than just fresh, local produce
- A guide to property planning for small landholders in the Shire of Esperance
- A guide to soil sampling for small landholders in the Shire of Esperance

