

# Wondaree Macadamias Tolga



1. **Name:** Greg O'Neill

**DOB:** 4/4/1958

## **Who is in your farming family?**

At this point in time it is only my wife, Wendy, and me. We have two children but they have both left the farm now. One is a designer in London, and one is a teacher in Brisbane. We are not expecting to see them back.

## **Where is your farm and what do you farm?**

We're situated just to the north of Tolga on the Atherton Tablelands. We have 160 acres here with 30 acres under macadamias (it used to be 70 acres prior to Cyclone Larry in 2006). Apart from macadamias, we grow some Callide Rhodes grass seed and we fatten cattle.

## **What is your farming background?**

I grew up in western Queensland on a sheep and cattle property near Richmond. My childhood was spent on the farm until I went away to boarding school. After that I became an electrician, and it was quite a few years before I came back to the land. That was on the Tablelands, to grow macadamias. I brought this farm in 1983 and planted the first trees in 1984.

## **2. Farming Memories - What has been so special for you living on a family farm?**

### **New Year's Day Party**

Growing up in western Queensland, there wasn't a lot of people around, but during the Christmas holidays Mum and Dad would host a big new year's day party for the whole district. We were very lucky as kids, Dad had built us a tennis court and a dam with big concrete blocks in it, 25 m apart, so we used to do swimming training there. We also had a little cricket pitch. The party would start about midday, and everyone would bring all their food and drinks. We would swim, play tennis and play cricket – it was just such a magic day and I have very fond memories of that as a child.

### **Buddy the Red Kangaroo**

When I was a young fellow, about 8 or 9, it was during one of the droughts, we would go shooting kangaroos because we had no grass for the sheep or cattle. This one particular shooting trip, I captured a young joey, I took him home and named him 'Buddy'. I reared 'Buddy' up from a tiny little joey and he became a huge buck, and was with us for about 7 or 8 years.

As he grew up we put a chain around his neck and engraved 'Buddy' on it. He was a magnificent animal, he would wrestle and fight us. He would go off on his own for long periods, and we would go off to boarding school, we wouldn't see each other for ages. But when we came home for holidays, on the odd occasion, we would see him. He'd come up to the house, particularly if it was dry, he would be looking for food. Even though he had gone quite wild, he would always accept food from my hand. The last visit was magic, he'd been away for a long time, we were home on holidays and it was really dry. Someone came in and said there was a big red kangaroo down at the bore drain. I quickly grabbed some bread from the kitchen and ran down there. Sure enough it was him, 'Buddy'. He'd grown massive, just like always, he took the bread from me -it was really special.

### **Kelpies**

I love kelpies. I had kelpies as a kid as sheep dogs. I have always had kelpies on the farm and I have a new beautiful black and tan kelpie, 10 months old, called Roy.

While the kids were young we had other kelpies and cats. Lots of litters of puppies and kittens which ended up in washing machines, or god knows where (laughing).



**Roy**



### 3. Farming Life Experiences - *What experiences can you recall which presented you and your family with a significant problem?*

A big event for us was Cyclone Larry. In 2006, when it hit, we had 7500 macadamia trees, including the initial block we had planted of 4000 trees. When Cyclone Larry hit, they just got totally smashed! We had to pull most of those out, leaving us with a smaller block of 3500 trees. In that block we had to replace about 1500 trees that had been wrecked.

The big management decision we were faced with was, “We’d just lost 20 years of work in 4 hours, did we want to replant and have the same angst and impact on our business again?”, with the knowledge that maybe another big cyclone could come through soon, or maybe it would be another 100 years. The anguish was what to do with our business. We had already gone down the road of value adding. That’s where we grow the nut, send it off for cracking and then we get it back. After flavouring and packaging, we distribute them under our own ‘Wondaree’ brand. All that became hugely disrupted when we didn’t have any crop after Cyclone Larry.

We did some research on the occurrence of cyclones on the eastern seaboard of Queensland and it was pretty horrific - you wouldn’t plant a single macadamia tree. But because I love growing macadamias, we decided to replant the small block and retain that. We figured that once the trees came back into production, it would fire up our value adding business again. We chose not to replant the other 4000 trees.

I must say the decision was vindicated because in 2011, along came Cyclone Yasi. Even though it wasn’t as bad as Larry, it damaged some of the replanted trees because they were at a vulnerable age. If we had replanted the big block, we would have had big losses again, just 5 years later.

With macadamias taking 5 years to come into production and losing 20 years of work, it took a little while to get over it. I was pretty flat for a long time and didn’t know if I wanted to do it anymore. But like all things in life, time is a great healer and you gradually fight your way through it, get re-invigorated and attack it again.

The block of 4000 was put to an alternative use. Growing Rhodes grass for seed and fattening some cattle. It’s a cyclone proof crop and cattle handle cyclones alright. We had a few cattle in both Larry and Yasi. They just tend to just sit down put their backside to the wind and then when it’s over, stand up and start eating, magic!

### 4. Looking Back - *What lessons were learnt? What has your farming life taught you?*

One of the great things living on a farm, is the skills you build. For example, my father was an ‘uneducated man’ but there was nothing he couldn’t turn his hand to. It was fortunate that we were taught all those things by him. The farming life brings those skills and makes you adaptable no matter where you end up.

Farming is a wonderful lifestyle but in this day and age it has to be run as a business. The resilience and patience of people on the land should not be lost on the rest of the community. It’s what this country was built on and it should be maintained.

#### More Stories:

As a kid out west, my brother and I used to collect birds eggs. We would go for miles. Just on foot with our dogs looking for nests in trees and along the creek banks. We built up this massive collection of Australian birds eggs, which was tremendous. We used to hang around to see the parents, use our bird books and make sure we knew exactly what we had found. That was a great memory to, we go from one end of the property to the other...well there was 50 000 acres!!

