

## Red Devons a commercial and lifestyle option

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A desire to combine their on-going interest in commercial cattle breeding with a flexible retirement interest has underpinned Peter and Dixie Leach's decision to invest in some Red Devon genetics.

The easy going Whakatane couple have had a two decade passion for breeding Limousin cattle and can count themselves among the first breeders to get on board with the well framed, evenly muscled exotics.

The Bay of Plenty region formed a reasonable following in the early eighties as exotic interest picked up, with around a dozen members with Peter as chairman of the Bay of Plenty Limousin Society.



■ Whakatane farmer Peter Leach has introduced Red Devons across his Limousins and ended up with an animal which is easily managed and delivering exceptional growth rates as calves.

The couple bred up their herd in the early eighties from imported French Limousin embryos, running the 40 head herd as a sideline on their 12ha block while Peter also worked at the nearby Carter Holt Whakatane paperboard mill.

The bigger frame of the Limousin bulls had always meant putting yearlings to the bull was rarely an option. "However it meant we were growing them bigger than we needed them to be as we aimed at calving two-year-olds. "No longer being registered for sales and stud purposes, we really did not need those big cows and we started looking for a different breed of easier calving bull we could use over our yearling non replacement heifers."

He never had calving problems with his two-year-old cows going to a Limousin bull, but was concerned at the weight of a Limousin going over his yearlings. Given their proximity to the strong Angus country of the East Coast, this was the first breed tried. However two years of bulls with "variable" temperament meant they were not in keeping with the lower stress, enjoyable lifestyle breeding Peter had envisaged.

After two seasons he bought a Red Devon from Joan Power at nearby Taneatua. "We were not looking for a registered stud bull, all we wanted was a quiet animal that would sire easily delivered calves without knocking the young cows around too much."

Now in her 80th year, Joan Power sold the Red Devon breeding herd from her Isca Stud near Taneatua last year. The complete herd of 20 breeding cows was bought by Wayne Aspin of Waiuku.

"Over calving it was getting to be a bit hard getting up in the night to check the cows," she says.

Over the last five years she says interest in Red Devons from dairy farmers has only increased, and the breed crosses well with all dairy breeds. "There is a Friesian herd down the road with Red Devon put over the tail enders, and an Ayrshire herd nearby too." She believes the breed's "donkey quiet" temperament is the key reason for

interest in the bulls, and easy calving for heifers is a bonus. The compact breed also do well on the lighter ashy soils around the Bay of Plenty, and allow for more "beef per acre" says Joan.

The Leach's bull from Isca is the offspring of semen from renowned bull Tilbrook Sunset, a UK sire bred by Gavin Hunter.

"He is from a strong polled line that makes him quite valuable here in New Zealand," says Joan.

Peter was keen to see the introduction of traditional British genetics bring greater hybrid vigour into the herd, delivering faster growth rates in the calves and enabling him to finish them before their second winter. He put the Red Devon bull over his 10 non-replacement heifers and this year will use him over late calving cows as well.

While still having 12 months growing to go, the first crop of calves exhibit all the strong frame characteristics of their Limousin mothers, but with the rounder, stockier features more typical of the traditional beef breeds. "The temperament is definitely a feature that we were promised would come through, and it has." Despite having the run of a rough 140ha block of land inland from Whakatane, the calves show little inclination to move too far when visited, and management is very much a casual affair of drafting them off as they wander pass the block's yards.

The rough block was bought by Peter and Dixie six years ago, and the Limousin herd has proved an ideal clearing gang for land once thick with wild barberry. Meanwhile the Devon-cross are also thriving in the free range conditions with their shorter legs and compact frames well suited to the steep sidlings and gullies on the property.

"We have sprayed it out, and they quite happily move through the sprayed barberry pushing it to one side and opening it up to the Manuka - the Devons also seem to be able to get well into this rougher country and are quite comfortable doing so."

"This is very much a lifestyle we have built up here. "The Red Devons are a nice, easily managed cross that take all the good points of long frame and good rear muscling with the Limousin. They combine it with an animal well suited to this country, easily managed and delivering exceptional growth rates as calves," says Peter.