

AUSTRALIA COAST TO COAST

OCTOBER 2014

COUNTRY STYLE

ESCAPE THE
EVERYDAY

*the garden
issue*

**ABC GARDENING
AUSTRALIA'S
SOPHIE THOMSON**
"I tried hard *not*
to be a gardener!"

**GOING TO
THE CHAPEL**
*The couple who
restored a church*

**DAYS OF WINE
AND ROSES LIFE**
ON A SA VINEYARD

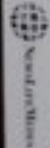
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Natalie and Erin
with Patrick, three,
and Georgina, five.

our life in the country

GRAIN FARMERS ERIN AND NATALIE CAHILL ARE
HAPPY TO RAISE THEIR FAMILY FAR FROM THE CITY
IN THE WEST AUSTRALIAN WHEATBELT.

WORDS JESSICA RULE PHOTOGRAPHY ALICIA TAYLOR



Erin Cahill comes from a long line of WA farmers, but is hardly bound by tradition. Having worked as an agronomist, he has begun a new farming enterprise with wife Natalie. Apart from a 64-hectare home block at Walebing, two hours north of Perth, they lease and sharefarm another 1450 hectares, growing canola, barley and wheat at two locations, 50 kilometres apart.

Combining his own crop farming with an agronomy business, Erin is a consultant to 30 farmers in the region. For their children — Georgina, five, and three-year-old Patrick — getting their hands dirty means spending time with Dad. "With Erin working two jobs, time is precious," Natalie says. "So the kids and I head out with him on the weekend to help with farming duties. Georgie can already pick out disease, weeds and bugs in the crops, and no doubt Patrick will be doing so soon."

Their newly renovated home is perched on a hill, among gum trees and four-metre-tall grass trees. "The house used to look like a Spanish hacienda," Natalie says. Now it has been converted into a modern Australian homestead, using a more appropriate vernacular of a tin roof and a wide verandah propped up by oiled white-gum posts that Erin felled on the property. Erin and Natalie are currently under pressure to make even more additions. "A Staffy puppy, and perhaps some chickens, as we don't have any pets yet," Natalie says. "Although we do have a kangaroo family living below the house..."

The children are enthusiastic garden and kitchen helpers. "It's usually messy, but worth it in the end," Natalie says. "Georgie's dream is to open a market stall selling dips, so we've been experimenting with beetroot from the garden." More such activities are intended. "Free time is something that I'm hoping to have more of," Erin says. "Next is completing the garden and landscaping with Natalie and the kids: it's going to be great."

"The first thing my colleagues asked when I said I was moving to Walebing was, 'What are you going to do with all your high heels?'"

natalie I grew up in Esperance, on the southern coast of WA. I sailed competitively and even represented Australia three times, and went on to win two national titles. Sailing and the beach were my life and passion, so it's funny that I've found such happiness away from both those things.

Erin and I moved in the same circles at university in Perth but we didn't know each other well. I bumped into him at the Boxing Day Test at the MCG in 2005. He had caught the midnight flight from Perth and was on his way up the stairs to buy a rain poncho, dressed in boardies and a T-shirt — which was funny because it was 12 degrees. I was really happy when he decided to join my friends and me at a pub that evening. We just clicked — but I had no idea he was interested in me, so it was a real shock when he asked me out!

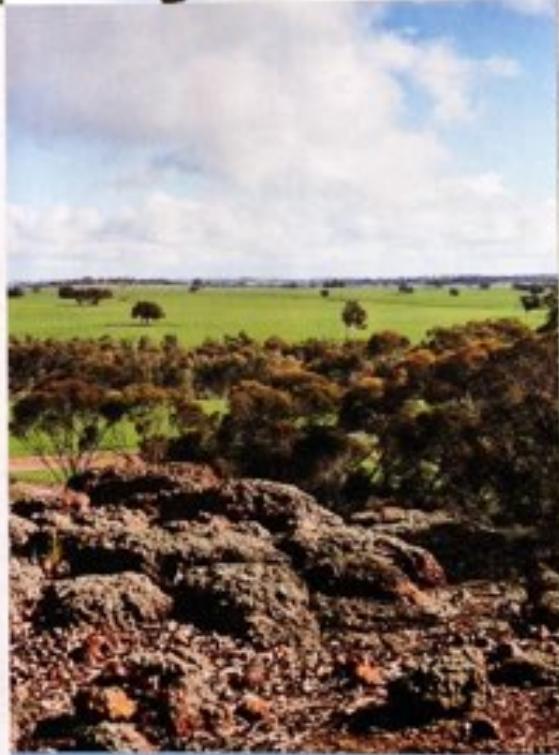
I moved back to Perth six months later. It was an easy decision because being with Erin was more important than anything else... but that's not to say that when I first moved it wasn't a shock. I was having an amazing adventure living in Melbourne and working in my dream job at BP, travelling all over Australia, New Zealand and Fiji setting up health initiatives and fitness programs. The first thing my colleagues asked when I said I was moving to Walebing was, "What are you going to do with all your high heels?" I lived in stilettos!

I had no experience of living on a farm, but I loved learning about the crops, driving tractors and being part of what Erin was so passionate about. The things I like most here are the people and beautiful sense of community. Having Georgina opened me up to more people. I'm blessed to have found some amazing women who are at similar stages in life; our children are the best of friends and so are we.

I haven't gone back to work while the kids are young, so we spend time cooking, gardening, exploring and playing. We don't have shopping centres or cinemas here, so we make fun together. This helps them become well-rounded and happy people. I think a country upbringing will keep our kids grounded and innocent. >

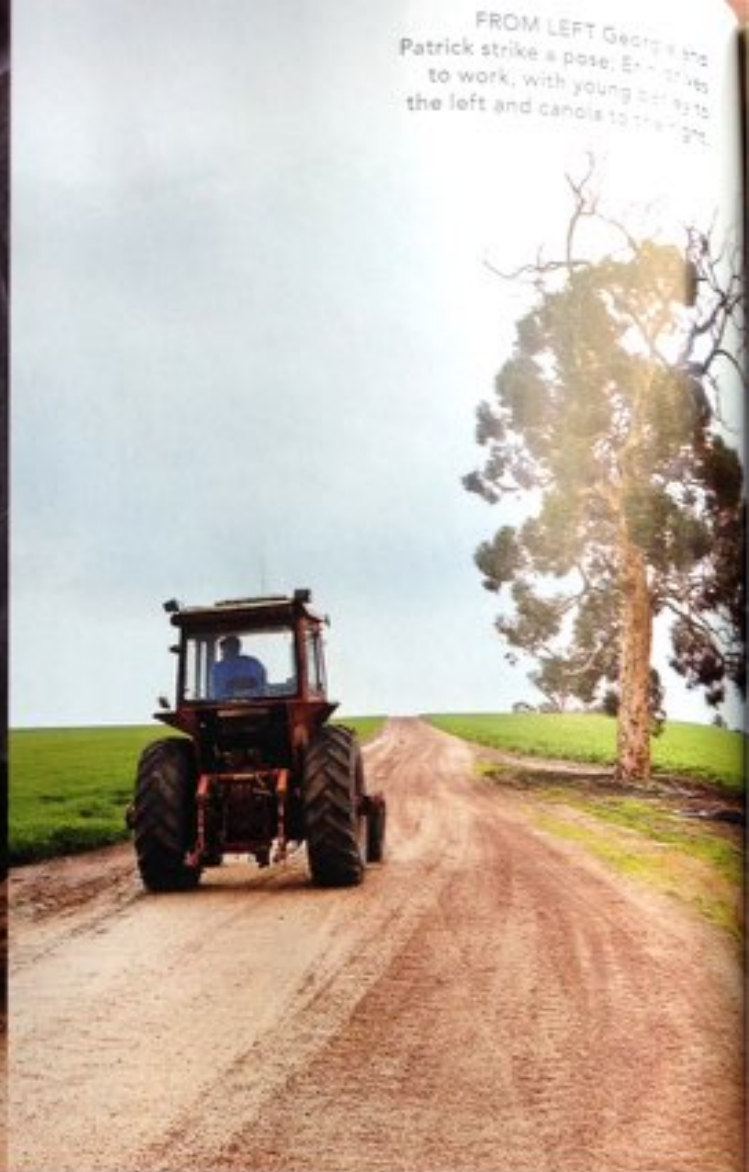


CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE
Weekends mean getting out with
Dad; strolling by a creek in the
valley; a view from one of the
sharefarming properties; "I think
a country upbringing will keep
our kids grounded and innocent,"
says Natalie; tractors and other
farm machinery depend on these
fuel tanks; an acacia blossoms;
grass trees and eucalypts surround
the house. FACING PAGE The
family that farms together:
"Georgie can already pick out
disease, weeds and bugs in the
crops, and no doubt Patrick will
be doing so soon," Natalie says.





FROM LEFT Georgie and Patrick strike a pose; Erin drives to work, with young Georgie to the left and candles to the right.



Since Georgie has been at school, I've started running some group exercise classes at Yerecoin and Calingiri, two small towns nearby. I now have nearly 30 ladies who come along each week, bringing about 15 children who come to play. I also do all the book work for the businesses, but of course my most important responsibility is creating a happy home that my family and friends love.

When summer comes, we'll head for the south-west coast, to Dunsborough. When you're married to a farmer, you need to drag them away from the farm during the holidays; otherwise you find they disappear to do this or that.

erin I'm a fourth-generation farmer, but we sold our family farm in 2000, so now I'm the first generation on this land. I've built up from 40 hectares to the 1450 we lease today. I've gone from a borrowed tractor and combine to running a modern, GPS-equipped plant with the latest technology. I'm proud of this progress.

I grew up on a sand-plain farm west of Moora, very near where our other farm is now. Dad's family were pioneer farmers in the eastern wheatbelt, but he decided to move into the higher rainfall areas in the mid-1970s, just after I was born. He left his brothers on the family farm in Merredin, which was sold this year after being in the family for 113 years. Mum and Dad live nearby, in Dandaragan, and Dad helps me out

during seeding and harvest time. One of my sisters married a farmer 30 kilometres north of Moora, and my other sister now lives in Perth.

In 1998 I started working for Wesfarmers CSBP — the fertiliser company — as an area manager, then as an agronomist. At the end of 2009, I set up our own agronomy business for 30 farmers who I had worked with for those 12 years. I would now call them good friends.

We moved onto this farm in 2007 when Natalie came up. I think the country is a great place to raise kids. Plus the traffic in the city drives me nuts. And there are lots of young people our age, who have all followed a very similar path to what I did — going away and coming back.

I find happiness sharing the simple things with Georgina and Patrick — explaining how nature works, taking them through the crops, showing them birds and kangaroos. I don't worry about them dealing with the artificial pressures of city life. I watch them with their friends, playing and moving around without a care in the world.

Natalie and I want to reduce the consulting business and make the pace of life more enjoyable, with more time to spend with family and farming. And then I'd like to surf more. I've been teaching Georgie when we head to Dunsborough or Lancelin in summer: I take her out in the white wash on her little board. Even though we live inland, I want them to know the benefits of the coast, too. *