

What a difference a dozen years can make

By Lisa Pahl

When Sean and Sue Delaney bought their Hills property 12 years ago it was so overrun with wild blackberry bushes they could only make their way around parts of it using tracks made by the local wildlife.

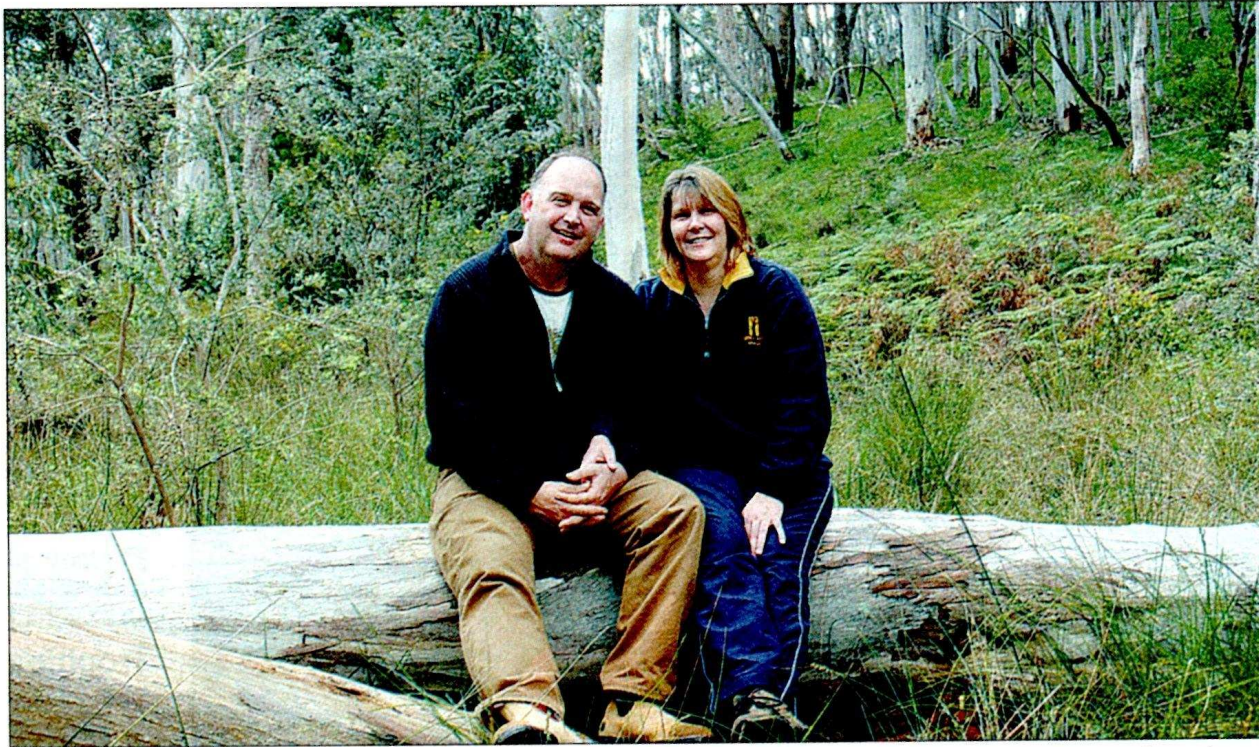
Up to 4ha of the Norton Summit site was covered by the invasive weed, which had choked a creekline, invaded a patch of endangered candlebark scrub and grew up to 2.5m in height in some places.

"We bought the property in 1997 and it had blackberries from one side to the other," Mrs Delaney said.

"We had no idea how much work was involved (in removing it), we just saw these beautiful white trees, the candlebarks, and fell in love with the place."

Now, more than a decade on, the couple has transformed the place, with substantial help from the local Natural Resources Management Board.

It has become a biodynamic vineyard and eco cellar door,



Sean and Sue Delaney's efforts to rehabilitate the degraded property they bought 12 years ago have been recognised with a State Landcare award.

Sinclair's Gully Wines, as well as an environmental haven with a restored area of candlebark bushland.

The pair's efforts were this month recognised when the business won the 2009 Primary

Producer State Landcare Award.

"We were very humbled and a little surprised," Mrs Delaney said of the win.

"We had no plans at the time we bought the property to have

an eco-certified cellar door or anything like that."

The couple's foray into winegrape growing came as a result of their work to rehabilitate the land.

"We put the vineyard in on

the cleared area that had been under 2.5m high blackberries," Mrs Delaney said.

"We thought that we had to do something so that we could keep the land under some control.

"We used conventional (vineyard management) methods to start with because we didn't know a lot about vineyards because we had both come out of office jobs."

In 2001 they shifted to biodynamic practices after noticing soil health problems in the vineyard.

"We stopped spraying and we now slash the grass between rows late in the season to encourage the native plants' seed heads to go back into the vine row and grow again," Mrs Delaney said.

"We are trying to keep things in balance with nature."

Since the switch to biodynamics, beneficial insects have returned to the property, along with a host of native bird and wildlife.

The 8ha of rejuvenated candlebark scrub is also now home to 150 species of native plants and dozens of birds, many of which are endangered or rare.