

Switch a total success



ABOVE: Shane FitzGerald, Total Grower Services, within a banana crop utilising the ecologically-friendly growing techniques.

BELOW: Part of Total Grower Services' technique involves the use of compost.



THERE is growing proof that ecology and farming can mix to create sustainable profitability.

Banana and cane farmer Les Blennerhassett has found moving from scheduled applications of synthetic chemicals and fertilisers for plant production to the tailored system of Total Grower Services has been a sound economic decision.

"The only problem we have experienced is finding workers capable of carrying the bigger bunches," Mr Blennerhassett said.

He has increased the quantity and quality of production while benefiting the ecology.

He has done this by dramatically reduced his use of fungicidal treatments and has healthier crops than ever before.

Mr Blennerhassett has also almost eliminated his use of synthetic inputs and has had bigger and better crops as a consequence.

In the past 18 months using Total Growers Services, his production has increased by more than 20 percent, while he has reduced all chemical use and eliminated some altogether.

Mr Blennerhassett grows bananas and sugarcane in El Arish, Mission Beach and the Murray Valley in the Great Barrier Reef Lagoon Catchment.

In the past, he used high synthetic input farming, using urea as the mainstay of his banana fertilisation program and with plant protection chemicals being applied on a scheduled basis.

Yet he would frequently have high fungal infestation problems and low yields, despite heavy synthetic treatments.

But now that rate of

fungicidal infestations has dropped off dramatically.

Total Grower Services is based on a holistic approach to farming that combines soil chemistry, soil biology, entomology and plant pathology to create a total treatment program specifically for Les's banana crops.

This program combines composting with the unique Petrik soil treatment to release nutrient tied up in the soil and maximise the efficiency of applied nutrient.

It is the result of study over decades across all types of farming systems throughout the world. The Total Growing Services system has four key components.

The first is soil testing and amending the soil to optimum balance of nutrients using the Petrik soil test.

Then Petrik soil treatments are applied in conjunction with fresh organic matter and or compost.

Third, there is monitoring of soil moisture to reduce stresses on plants.

Finally, crop monitoring is done to achieve pesticide savings achievable with the subsequent increases in plant health.

Mr Blennerhassett has found that the 32 hectares (80 acres) of bananas produced 1278 cartons an acre over the last year, despite significant flood damage to parts of his property.

This has been achieved while fungicide treatments have been cut by 85pc, and synthetic inputs by 65pc.

The Total Grower Services system has been successfully implemented on more than 50 farms in North Queensland.

● For more information go to www.totalgs.com.au