

factsheet

A community approach:

Ag'n'Chat - specialised and innovative training for farm women



Ag'n'Chat

Ag'n'Chat is exactly what it sounds like a relaxed chat about agricultural topics that the participants are interested in.

Groups of women meet in a venue where they feel comfortable, at a time of day that fits in with busy farm life to learn from guest presenters and each other.

Who is involved?

Ag'n'Chat participants are local women who have varying roles in their farm business and have vastly different skills, backgrounds and interest in the farm business. Some are new members of the farm business with little experience in agriculture and production issues. Others are actively involved in office work only and others are predominantly involved in the practical side. Young children are made welcome so that childcare does not become an issue.

Where are the groups?

A number of Ag'n'Chat groups have now been formed in southern NSW. Groups are active in Yerong Creek, Ganmain, Junee, Corowa and Marrer.

The longest running group was formed at Yerong Creek in July 1999. Two years later, at the request of local farming women, Ganmain Ag'n'Chat was initiated. In 2003, groups were formed at Junee, Marrer and Corowa.

Project: Community driven program to increase the involvement of women in the whole farm business.

Participants: Local women from rural areas, Weeds CRC and NSW Department of Primary Industries.

Location: Rural areas of southern NSW.

VET sector resource: RTC2016A *Recognise plants*; RTD4805A *Facilitate ongoing group development*; RTC5011A *Collect and identify plants*

What do they do?

Groups generally meet in local halls or at their own farms when required. The monthly activities (excluding school holidays) of the groups are providing women with the confidence and knowledge to attend and actively participate in more traditional field days and workshops. Importantly, members

have reported an increased involvement in their farm business.

The groups choose to undertake various activities that provide information on topics such as:

- weed identification;
- herbicide use and resistance management;
- grain marketing;
- livestock nutrition and diseases;
- feed requirements and budgeting;
- farm family communication;
- record keeping;
- soil testing and soil profiles;
- crop rotations;
- crop monitoring (germination testing, plant counts); and
- tours at local farm machinery field days and DPI research institutes.

There have also been joint workshops between the Ag'n'Chat groups that provide an excellent opportunity for interaction between farming women from different districts.



Understanding how to do a soil test and interpret the results was a popular topic with women and children alike.

Photo: Di Holding

Why just women?

One of the reasons that many farm women don't go to field days and farm walks is they feel that they aren't up to the skill level of their partner and the local farming groups. Often they don't understand large parts of technical discussions and feel threatened by all the jargon. In these situations it is difficult to ask questions when they feel everyone else understands. It is not an environment conducive to learning.



At the yearly planning meeting, small groups were formed to 'brainstorm' workshop topics. Photo: Di Holding

By having women only groups, specialised and innovative training can be developed. The training is self-directed, addresses the particular needs of each group and is provided in a flexible format to encourage participation. Enhancing the knowledge

and skills of farming women gives them the confidence and ability to become more involved in their farm business and thus complement the skills of the other members.

Getting started

The first meeting of each group was facilitated by a local DPI extension officer and designed so that the groups' needs were understood, their goals clearly set and the topics of future meetings planned.

The groups needed to decide:

- when, where and how often they would like to meet;
- what topics the meetings should cover; and
- who would be the local group contact person (and for how long they would hold this position).

Group members were asked to fill out a questionnaire to benchmark their involvement in their farm business and to assess what they would like to learn more about. Topic areas included:

- finance (monthly accounts, budgets);
- decision making (capital & property purchases, business goals & direction, succession planning, paddock

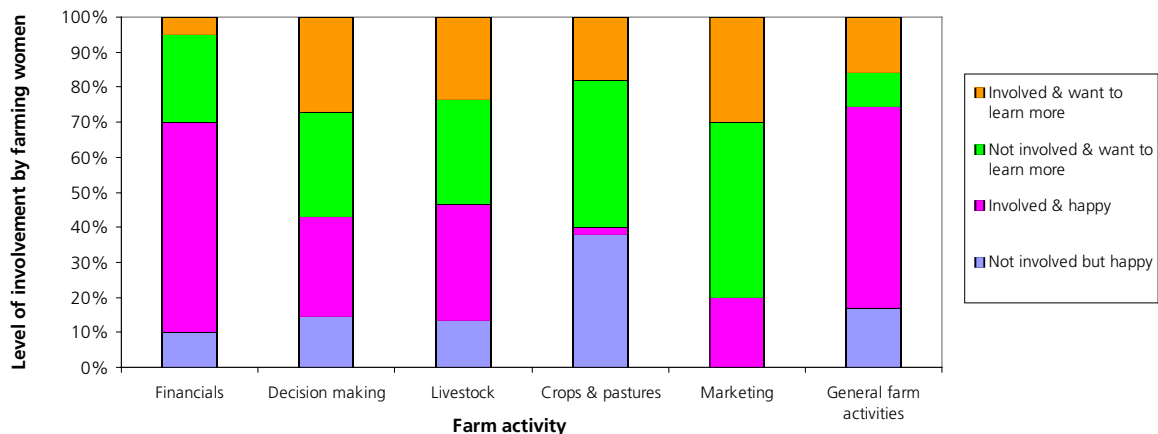


Group activities are conducted in a 'child friendly' environment. Photo: Di Holding

management);

- livestock (stock work, record keeping);
- crops and pastures (monitoring, record keeping, chemical selection, boom spray operation);
- marketing (grain, livestock, wool); and
- general farm activities (school bus run, 'meals on wheels', ordering & collecting goods, research, field days, organising holidays).

Ideas for future meeting topics were identified and collated on a white board. The topics and presenters for the next six meetings were decided upon by general consensus and on a seasonal basis. Presenters were contacted by the group contact person.



A benchmarking survey was undertaken at the initial planning meeting of each group and then revisited each year. The results from Ganmain Ag'n'Chat in 2001 are shown above.

Survey design: Di Holding, Kirrily Condon, Annabel Bowcher

Case study: weed ID workshop for Ag'n'Chat

Desire to improve weed identification knowledge

Weed and crop seedling identification was a topic that all of the groups wanted to learn more about. A short workshop was developed by the Weeds CRC education staff. It focused on identifying plant parts by describing them using common terminology.

The women were shown the distinguishing characteristics of plants that will aid correct identification. This skill provided the women with a greater ability to observe and correctly describe unknown plants to local agronomists or weeds officers, or to find the plant in a reference book.

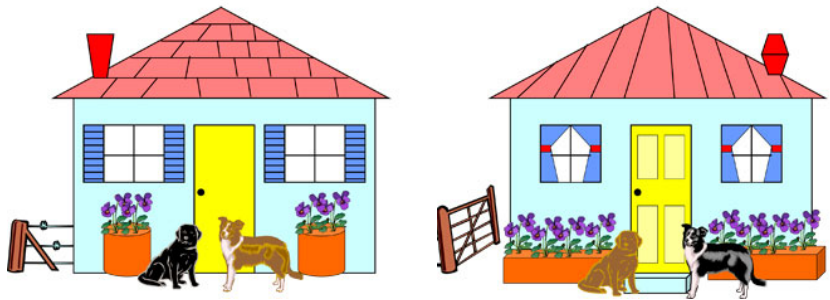
Content of workshop

The workshop began with an introduction outlining the structure of the morning's activities:

- a simple exercise to emphasise the importance of observation skills;
- narrow leaf plant information (eg grasses, rushes, bulbs) and the parts of these narrow leaf plants that are used for identification;
- narrow leaf plant practical identification exercise;
- broadleaf plant information (including legumes);
- broadleaf plant practical identification exercise; and
- further questions and conclusions.

Beginning the workshop

The first group activity was devised to emphasise the importance of using observation skills to describe common things. The women formed small groups and were given two colour diagrams of houses. They were then



The initial observation activity involved describing two 'houses' so that they could be differentiated from each other. Houses, like plants, have common parts and these parts differ in aspects such as colour, composition and shape. Observing and describing these differences aids identification. Figure design: Annabel Bowcher

asked to describe these commonly seen object so that the two houses could be differentiated from each other. This preliminary exercise demonstrated that plants also have common parts which differ in colour, composition and shape. By observing these differences, plants can be differentiated from each other and identified.

Describing narrow leaf plants

Handouts illustrating the parts of the narrow leaf plant, and some general information on crop seedling ID were distributed. This information was adapted from the reference books 'Crop Weeds (Wilding, Barnett and Amor) and 'More Crop Weeds' (Moerkerk and Barnett).

Each person was also given a barley seedling and an oat seedling to use as a reference for observing and describing plant parts. On a white board the plant parts were drawn and described. The women were then asked to take a few minutes to look at their seedlings and then apply this new knowledge to describing the barley and oat seedlings.

The group was then able to compile a list on the whiteboard that described each seedling so that a comparison could be made between the two.

Hands-on time

The practical part of the narrow leaf plant identification session consisted of giving each small group time to use these new observation skills to describe and identify ten common, but unlabelled seedlings (weed, pasture and crop seedlings). Each seedling species was in a separately numbered plastic bag (often with the seed still attached as this can aid identification). The small groups were asked to describe the seedlings and match the numbers to the list of names provided on a separate sheet of paper.

A group discussion about the results followed and the correct identification made according to the seedlings' distinguishing plant characteristics.



Commonly found narrow leaf and broadleaf seedlings were placed in a numbered plastic bag and then matched to a list of plant names. Photo: Annabel Bowcher

Describing broadleaf plants

This theory and practical process was continued for broadleaf plants (including weed, pasture and crop seedlings). A selection of weed and plant ID guides were available for the groups to use during the workshop.

Focusing on observation skills

The workshop concluded by emphasising that it is not essential to be able to remember each plant or to be able to use a scientific key but it is important to be able to effectively observe and describe plants for subsequent identification. These skills are also useful for monitoring the health of crops and pastures (disease, insects and nutritional disorders).

Where to now?

The founding coordinators for the Ag'n'Chat groups, Di Holding, Kirrily Condon and Annabel Bowcher, hope that new women's groups, such as those formed at Leeton, Deniliquin and Griffith, are able to build upon the success of the pilot groups in southern NSW.

By encouraging the formation of other groups across Australia, Ag'n'Chat (or similar groups) will help provide a large number of farming women with skills, resources and opportunities to network



Ganmain Ag'n'Chat members toured farm machinery exhibits at the Henty Machinery Field Days and their activities attracted a keen interest from the media. Article: *The Weekly Times*, October 3, 2001.

with other farmers, advisers and researchers.

The establishment of Ag'n'Chat groups can have a wide reaching impact across rural Australia, including direct benefits to individual farm businesses, regional agricultural production and sustainability and rural community networks.

As Wendy Muffet, a women actively involved in her farm business near Forbes said in support of these women's groups, "If there was a time in our history that our farming industry needed to fully utilise every resource available to it, that time is now!"

For further information visit the Weeds CRC's website: www.weeds.crc.org.au

CRC for Australian Weed Management

Waite Road, Urrbrae
PMB 1, Waite Campus
Glen Osmond, SA 5064

T 08 8303 6590

F 08 8303 7311

E crcweeds@adelaide.edu.au

Written by: Annabel Bowcher, Education Officer and Di Holding, Project Officer, Weeds CRC, (NSW DPI Wagga Wagga, NSW).

Acknowledgements: Kirrily Condon, formerly, district agronomist NSW Agriculture, Cootamundra, NSW, and the members of Ag'n'Chat groups in southern NSW.



Established and supported under the Australian Government's Cooperative Research Centres Program

Ref: 31/2005/fs

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