

CHRIS FERREIRA

Foreword by Sabrina Hahn

A Place in the Country

A guide to creating your patch of rural paradise



FREMANTLE PRESS

To my precious son River, my beautiful partner Renée, to those creating a low-carbon future—and to all those wonderful trees quietly and resolutely working to heal our beautiful planet.

‘There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come.’

Victor Hugo

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Foreword

Chris Ferreira has written a truly down-to-earth manual on hobby farming. A solid twenty years of experience has gone into the writing of this book. It holds no punches, removes the stardust from the eyes and makes you take a long, hard look at the realities of running a rural property.

A Place in the Country looks at both the macro and the micro picture of hobby farming. It arms you with the knowledge you need to avoid the pitfalls and offers practical and attainable solutions before they become problems.

The amount of information in this book is astonishing. Chris shows you how to create a sustainable management plan for long-term success, and covers everything you need to know about animal management, soil, pasture, weeds, bushfire control measures and revegetation.

I believe all responsible property owners should operate with a degree of custodianship for the land they have acquired. Chris offers a new way of managing the landscape, with sustainability at the heart of every chapter. Chapters on arresting tree decline, protecting existing bushland and working *with* the land rather than against it are inspirational.

A Place in the Country will help you enjoy the experience of working the land in a way that won't lead to prematurely grey hair. I love the style of writing Chris has adopted: friendly, and riddled with humour and compassion for you—the intending hobby farmer. His own account of his donkey, 'The Ghost Who Walks', is hilarious and reminds us of the perils and joys of owning a rural property.

My advice to you—the hobby farmer—is to read this book. I wish you all the very best in your endeavours.

Sabrina Hahn





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Introduction

Did you know that there are close to a quarter of a million so-called 'hobby farmers'* throughout Australia? It's a figure that dwarfs the number of bona fide large-scale commercial farmers out there, and reflects one of the biggest demographic shifts in this country's recent history.

While the size of the average hobby farm—or rural property—may not seem significant in a country the size of Australia, collectively this group manages well over a million hectares of land and plays an increasingly important role in shaping the very character and future of 'the bush'—injecting it with vital finances, fresh energy, new ideas and innovative technologies that offer hope and promise to these often embattled rural areas.

Across the nation and beyond, city folk are clamouring to claim back something that has been lost or stolen from the urban landscape—tranquillity, simplicity, closeness to nature, a place to belong, a place that feels safe.

It might represent a link back to a childhood spent on the family farm, or it might just echo time spent playing in the vacant block next door or the creek at the bottom of the road. Either way, the lure of the rural landscape is strong, and life on the land can offer much.

But the flipside of this sweeping 'tree change' is that one out of every three new hobby farmers sells up within the first three years. Yes, just three short years!

The reasons for this high attrition rate are complex and varied. More often than not, though, the tipping point is the realisation that the dream of life in the country doesn't always match the reality. There's the tyranny of distance, the isolation and, perhaps most profoundly, the dawning awareness that managing a rural property is not as easy as might have been assumed. It can be bloody hard work, with a never-ending series of challenges to grapple with, and sometimes nature itself seems to be conspiring against you as your carefully established plants appear to systematically die, get eaten by insects or succumb to the brutal realities of a landscape without the luxury of an unlimited water supply.

This situation has not been helped by the fact that, despite the clear emergence of this burgeoning group, until now there has been little specific and detailed support for the unique demands and challenges faced by the aspiring hobby farmer.

This book is a bold and comprehensive attempt to rectify this. It has been written for the hobby farmer, the rural lifestyle or whatever else you prefer to call yourself, who has chosen the rural dream and is keen to make a go of it.

Yours is not the standard suburban residential block, nor is it the typical large-scale commercial farm—which means you are neither the backyard gardener nor the typical commercial farmer. You are something in between, with anything from half a hectare to 1000 hectares. You'll face challenges unheard of in a suburban garden, and at a degree of intensity far greater than that seen on any full-scale commercial farm. In fact, you'll face all the problems commercial farmers face—from droughts to plagues to

pestilence—but compressed into an area a fraction of the size of a typical commercial farm. This means you won't have the luxury of space—nor, in most cases, the specialised experience, contacts or equipment—to tackle these problems effectively or at least hide or dilute their worst effects. For this reason, getting the most out of a hobby farm can in many ways be a far greater challenge than working a larger commercial farm.

This book is designed to help you understand the realities of life on the land at hobby-farm scale. It will enable you to make sense of what's going on, anticipate and plan for the challenges that can arise, and develop a realistic plan to nurture—with maximum joy and minimum heartache—the healthy future of your very own patch of rural paradise.

As well as providing information, the book is designed to help you apply each new piece of knowledge to your own specific property, with regular 'Now it's your turn ...' features scattered throughout the text. In this way it's a bit like the workshops I run with people just like you all over Australia—except that you don't need to leave the comfort of your own armchair!

A Place in the Country is the product of a lifetime of experience (I grew up on a horse farm!) and more than twenty-five years of professionally teaching and supporting small-scale rural landholders to make the most of their patch of paradise. I don't pretend to know everything, but I have seen a lot of rural land, landholders and land-management issues, and what I can offer you is some tried and tested guidance based on this experience.

Living in Australia is an honour and a privilege, and having a piece of rural land to care for is surely one of the greatest opportunities you can have in this magnificent country. This book will help you to steer a course that balances the needs of your particular piece of land with what you hope to get back from the rural lifestyle.

Wherever you are, and whatever it is you hope to achieve there, I wish you success—and a long-lasting love affair with your land!

Chris Ferreira

- * For the sake of consistency I use the term 'hobby farmer' throughout this book, but I'm fully aware that this is not everyone's preferred way of describing themselves—so please don't be offended if you're one of those hardworking rural landholders who sees your backbreaking slog on the land as anything but a 'hobby'!







PART 1

**So you want to buy
a rural property:**

*How do you choose
the perfect patch?*



Chapter 1

Are you *sure* you want to buy a rural property?

Some facts to consider before taking the plunge

That might seem like a strange question to ask at the beginning of a book on getting the most out of your rural property, but the reality is that many of the problems faced by aspiring hobby farmers have their beginnings in this decision. So let's start by facing some of the cold, hard facts about owning and living on a rural property—what the real estate agents and lifestyle programs generally neglect to mention. Because I'd like to let you in on a little secret: behind the gloss and romantic appeal of the country lifestyle lie a few potentially nasty—or, at the very least, challenging—things you should know before taking the plunge. If you can handle each of them without running away in terror, then you may well be a prime candidate for a joyous and prosperous rural life.

Fact 1: There's no such thing as a maintenance-free rural property

That image you have of a couple of leisurely landowners sipping wine while reclining in hammocks on the porch of their lush patch of paradise? Forget it. Every property—and I mean every property—requires work to maintain it, and a whole heap more if you want to improve it. There will *always* be firebreaks to keep clear, fuel loads to manage, weeds to wage war on and irrigation systems to grapple with—and that's just in the simplest, least ambitious scenario. Let alone putting up and repairing fences, building sheds, planting and maintaining crops and pastures, digging dams, and so on and so on ...

Fact 2: Rural properties can be dreadfully uncomfortable

There's a reason Australia is among the most urbanised countries in the world. Our rural climate is notoriously harsh, with searingly hot weather giving way to icy or even snow-

The renovator's dream!

Are you sure you want to buy a rural property?

dusted periods, all punctuated by long droughts, devastating floods and destructive cyclones. As a result, most of our cities are based along the coastline where it's cooler during those hot months and there are plenty of air-conditioned buildings and other distractions when the weather gets unbearable.

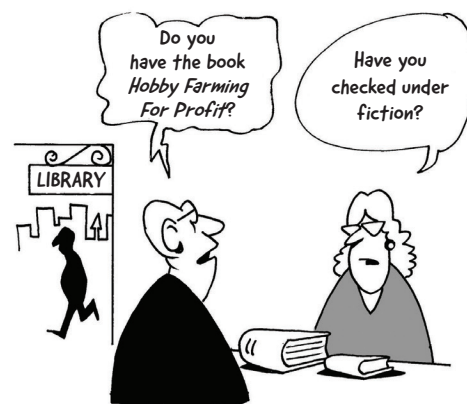
Such respite is not freely on hand in the country. And to make matters worse, many rural houses offer little more than 'rustic charm' in that they might be poorly designed for the climate, shoddily built and lacking in the means to mitigate the worst of nature's excesses. It can be grim fare being holed up on your rural 'retreat' at the height of a heatwave or in the depths of a cold snap, in nothing more substantial than a wooden shack (or old caravan!) that offers little relief from the furnace-like heat or bone-chilling cold outside. And escaping such depressing digs can be difficult if you've sold up and made that your only home, or if the expense of buying and then improving the property comes on top of servicing the financial burdens of a primary home in the suburbs.

Fact 3: Rural properties can be lonely

While escaping the urban crowds is a common motivation for self-imposed rural exile, you might well find yourself going from one extreme to the other. By their very nature, rural areas are sparsely populated—especially in Australia, where we have curiously shied away from the European concept of clustered country hamlets and instead established rural subdivisions that place their residents at just the right density to impede socialising. This isolation can be compounded if one member of your household works away from home every day while another is left, perhaps with young children, 'home alone'.

Fact 4: Rural properties are the last great 'money pit'

Unless you're happy with your new property exactly the way it is—and my experience suggests that if you are, you are among a very lucky minority—or you've landed yourself a great big fat benefactor, in buying a country property you will be committing to a steady and sometimes spectacular drain on your finances. The expenses incurred on a rural property are usually greater than those of a typical urban dwelling, both because of the 'tyranny of distance' and because the size of the property means you'll need more of everything to get the job done. And if you're planning to add the cost of keeping animals to this mix, look out: you might see some nasty spikes in your household expenditure, especially when (yes, not 'if') one or more of your precious herd gets sick or injured.



Fact 5: Rural places can be unsafe

This might sound like heresy, but unfortunately it can be true for a few reasons. Firstly, theft from hobby farms can be a real risk—especially given the aforementioned development pattern that sees most rural homes worryingly isolated and obscured from neighbours. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, there is greater risk in rural

Get real!

One out of every three new hobby farmers in Australia sells up within just three short years. The main reason for this is the mismatch between the romantic appeal and the sometimes harsh realities of country life.

areas of being directly affected by bushfires, floods, cyclones and/or other severe weather events, depending on your region. And if such disaster does strike, you're also further away from hospitals and other emergency services. This latter point also applies in the event of an accident with farming machinery—the risks of which are of course heightened when living on a farm!

Fact 6: Rural places can be noisy

This, too, might sound paradoxical, but let me explain. There are two basic types of people attracted to rural life, and their reasons—and thus their lifestyles—couldn't be more different. First there are those 'escaping' from the hustle and bustle of the city and seeking instead the peace and serenity of the country. And then there are those 'driven' to the rural outskirts because their jobs or hobbies would (or should!) get them arrested in the densely populated suburbs. These are the truckies who need to start up their rigs at 3 am, the dirt-bike enthusiasts and dragsters committed to honing their craft, and those DIY fanatics intent on recreating the Sydney Harbour Bridge with power tools in their shed until the wee small hours. While each of these groups has a perfect right to do their own thing, heaven help you if you end up next door to a member of the opposing team!

Don't get me wrong—if done for the right reasons, the rural life is simply one of the greatest experiences you could possibly hope for. But it is worth entering this brave new world with your eyes wide open and your rose-coloured glasses firmly packed away, rather than falling for the romantic prose and airbrushed images of the glossy real estate brochures (no offence intended to that esteemed profession!). Such an approach will ensure that you genuinely know what you're in for and that you choose a property that's realistically right for you. Which leads us to our next topic: how do you find the right rural property?

Now it's your turn ...

Am I sure? How do I really feel about the facts of rural life?

Get yourself a dedicated notebook (you'll be using it a lot as you work your way through this book), and take the time to give some serious, honest consideration to each of the cold, hard facts listed in this chapter. Write down your thoughts and feelings about each one, making sure everyone involved (partner, children and so on) has a say. Then decide for yourself whether buying—and establishing, sustaining and living on—a rural property is really what you want. Remember: it's better to be honest with yourself now than to suffer a serious case of hobby farmer heartache later!

Are you sure you want to buy a rural property?



Chapter 2

Getting it right the first time

The 'eyes wide open' approach to choosing
your perfect patch

If you're still reading at this point then you obviously haven't been scared off (yet!), and you've established that yes, you really do want to buy a rural property. Nice one! So how do you decide on the right one? Do you just 'follow your heart', or is there more to it than that?

Actually, there's a *lot* more to it. So often we get swept up in the idea of a rural romance without remembering that we're about to make one of the biggest financial decisions of our life based on little more than a feeling. The purpose of this chapter is to help curb that rush of blood to the head and allow you instead to make a sound, considered and ultimately more fruitful decision.

The basic idea, as obvious as it might sound, is to look for a property that's not just right but right *for you*. I've lost count of the number of stories I've heard of land purchases going pear-shaped simply because the buyers didn't start by asking themselves the most basic and yet most profoundly important question: *Is this land suited to my proposed uses?* If it's not, you're at risk of developing a severe case of 'hobby farmer heartache' and of finding the whole experience of living on the land far less than fulfilling.

Start the search! Where to begin

Nowhere is the adage 'Do it once and do it well' more applicable than to buying a rural property. If you want your first purchase to be your last (for the right reasons!), take heed of the following important tips.

Planned to perfection! This property shows all the features of a well designed and managed hobby farm.

Go slow, don't rush it and don't impulse buy

This is the single most important message to take in. Tempting as it may be to get started on your country dream, to snap up a particular property before an anticipated price hike or to beat some other pushy purchaser to the punch, in the long run it always pays to shop around and be fully confident before you sign anything. This sound strategy is your best chance of avoiding the debilitating symptoms of hobby farmer heartache.

Do your homework on a range of possible areas first

As they say in the real estate game, 'Location, location, location'—and this will be your all-important first decision. Before you decide on an area, let alone a property, consider realistically how well a range of possible areas would meet your needs. Ask the tough questions. Remember that the absence of the everyday comforts taken for granted in our cities and suburbs is easily overlooked in the whirlwind of your first rural romance, but these can be major losses and difficult to adjust to. Ask yourself the questions listed in the table, and give yourself honest answers.



Surprise, surprise! What you find is not always what is advertised. [Image courtesy Carbon Neutral]

Cause of hobby farmer heartache	Diagnostic questions to ask yourself	Answers that should ring alarm bells	The prognosis
The tyranny of distance	If I were to choose this area, how would I feel driving to and from work five days a week (or perhaps thirty to forty times a year if it would be a 'weekender')? How many hours on the road would that be, and what would the costs be—financially, physically, socially and emotionally?	I would be spending a minimum of three hours a day (or six hours most weekends) driving.	Ouch! That's a lot of time to spend cooped up in a car—maybe with whingeing kids—in order to gain your rural 'freedom'. While it can be tempting to look further afield for cheaper and perhaps quieter land, that extra distance will not only consign you to hours behind the wheel but will also become a major obstacle to spending the desired amount of time on your property.

Cause of hobby farmer heartache	Diagnostic questions to ask yourself	Answers that should ring alarm bells	The prognosis
So much to do, so little time	Realistically, how many hours a week could I expect to spend working on a property in this location, factoring in my existing employment, family, social and other commitments?	I'd be lucky to manage half a day a week, consistently.	This is probably the absolute minimum a rural property can realistically tolerate—especially if you have grand plans to improve it. Any less and you'll be struggling just to keep things from getting on top of you. Maybe shift your search to a more convenient location.
No one told me this would happen!	What does the local government have planned for the area over the next five to ten years? What do the locals do for fun, and what would my neighbours be like?	The local government has plans for the 'expansion', 'progress' or 'development' of the area, which it sees as becoming the next big thing. The area's social hub is the local Harley-Davidson or dirt-bike racing club.	Believe me, it happens more often than you'd think—a highway suddenly appears on the horizon, subdivisions eat into adjacent farmland, your neighbours are all Harley-Davidson enthusiasts and their kids have two-stroke dirt bikes. These are the things you want to know before you arrive for that first weekend of tranquil downtime on your new property.
Bloody hell, this 'life on the land' thing is hard work!	What would I need to do to make a property work out here? What do I honestly know about managing a rural property in this area?	I want to keep animals and make a quid, but the house is small and the land is quite run-down from generations of commercial farming. I have absolutely no idea how to start improving it myself, and I don't know whether there are any local contractors or others willing to travel here.	Sadly, this list of answers is limited only by your imagination. I'm honestly not trying to put you off—especially if you really, really enjoy a challenge! But if the place you're getting excited about seems like it would need work, work and more work that you don't know how (or can't afford) to do and that there'd be nobody around to help you with, then it might be wise to take a cold shower and look elsewhere!

Spend some time in your preferred area(s)

Even after you've honestly answered all these questions, don't even think about deciding firmly on an area until you've spent a fair bit of time there and experienced it in all its different moods. Try to visit at a few different times of the year, or at least find out through local knowledge (see below) what the place is like over a typical twelve-month period. A pretty country town in the middle of spring, paddocks brimming with greenery and roadsides carpeted with wildflowers, might be a world away from the barren dustbowl it becomes in the grip of a hot, dry spell.

Take a picnic, go there on weekends as well as during the week, get a feel for the place in all its guises and meet some of your would-be neighbours. Check out the vibe—explore the shops, the cafes, the pub, the rural hub, the school—find out what's on and what the locals do for fun. Try to imagine yourself living there—especially at the height of a heatwave and in the depths of a cold snap. If the only building in town is a run-down version of the ubiquitous 'Commercial Hotel' and its scantily clad female staff are the area's cultural highlight, then you might want to keep searching for a location that offers a little more!

Talk to the locals

Find out from people who live in the area what life there is really like. Local businesses and government centres can be good resources here. If there's a Landcare Officer in the region (see 'What's in a name?' below), ask to spend a bit of time with them. They'll know a lot about the issues that will be of importance to you—what the land is like, what environment issues affect the area, how the region functions socially and what developments are proposed.

Try before you buy

While you can't realistically do this with an actual property you have your eye on (although that would be nice!), you can do the next best thing—spend some time on someone else's property in the area. If you have a friend or acquaintance with a hobby farm in your preferred region, ask to spend some time there. Even some time on a local farmstay or other rural accommodation will do the trick. Watch the owners in action and observe what life is really like for a rural landholder in that region.

What's in a name?

Throughout this book I will refer you to your local Landcare Officer for further information and advice about a whole range of things. Your local government office should be able to tell you if there is a Landcare Officer in your area. Other titles these wonderful folk might go by include biodiversity officer, natural resource management officer and sustainable land management officer. These titles all mean roughly the same thing, and their holders will be able to point you in the right direction wherever you are.

Now it's your turn ...

Starting your search: Slow and steady wins the race

Set aside some time for all the members of your household (and anyone else who would be affected by this major decision) to carefully and honestly go through all the considerations and processes presented here, *before* deciding firmly on an area—let alone a specific property. Remember: do it once and do it well!

Enlist a search party

Get yourself about thirty eyes and ears looking for you. Once you've identified an area you like, ask friends and acquaintances to keep a lookout for potential properties for you. Enlist local real estate and stock agents, rural traders, business owners, Landcare Officers and even local government if you can. Be sure to give them specifics about what you want—and what you *don't* want—otherwise their efforts may become more hindrance than help.

It might be the perfect property, but is it perfect for me?

Now that you're at the stage of considering specific properties, it's crucial to pin down exactly what it is that you want from an actual property, to ensure some alignment between what you want and what you'll consider buying. So before you go any further, take a moment to think about and articulate your own personal reasons for 'going bush', because this will help you later to hone your hunt.

Over many years of working with thousands of aspiring and actual hobby farmers, I've found that there are four main reasons why people want to get their slice of rural heaven:

- a more self-sufficient lifestyle
- a tranquil nature retreat
- a place to keep animals
- a place to establish a commercial enterprise.

Identifying yourself in relation to these overarching goals will help you to refine your hunt.

Now it's your turn ...

The perfect property: My reasons

Write down your top five reasons for wanting a rural property.

Self-sufficient lifestyle

You've had enough of city life and can't wait to have your own vegie patch, chooks and orchard, perhaps with the odd 'four-legged lawn mower' to keep the grass down and maybe even 'fall into the freezer'.

A property with a balance of cleared land and bush will give you the space to try your hand at various self-sufficiency activities as well as the feeling of having gone 'back to nature'. Look for well drained soil that will allow you to grow things; soil that's shallow, boggy or sandy will make your work much harder and restrict it to a much smaller scale. You'll also want your soil to be free of past uses that might have left unwanted residues. A little bit of undulation will give you the flexibility to try different things in different areas.

Ideal characteristics

- A balance of cleared land and bush
- Well drained soils
- Moderate undulation

Avoid like the plague

- Uncleared bush blocks
- Former commercial agricultural or horticultural land
- Land near rural or extraction industries

Tranquil nature retreat

You're fed up with the rat-race of modern urban life, and you recognise the serenity and sheer beauty of our bushland and all it contains. The further away you are from noisy neighbours and unsightly developments the better. You are the reason the term 'tree change' was coined.

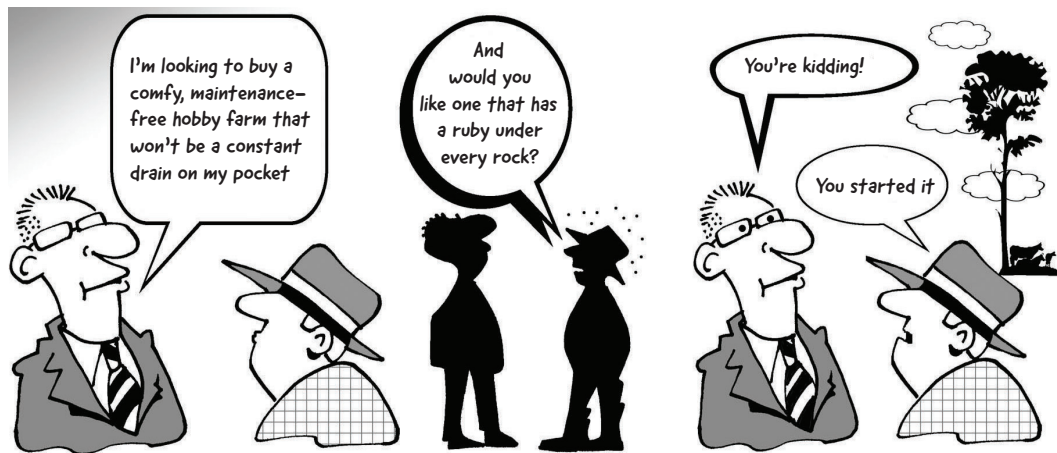
A property that's predominantly bush will be ideal for you, since it's hard to imagine a nature retreat without at least some nature, and while you might be skilled at revegetation, it does take time. Degraded bushland may be an option, as it offers a chance to restore nature's glory. Like-minded neighbours are a must—you really will be an unhappy camper if you find that your neighbours are keen on monster trucks or loud motorbikes, or if they think spraying herbicide on windy days is an effective means of chemical dispersal. Remember that 'one out of every three within the first three years' statistic!

Ideal characteristics

- Predominantly bush
- Like-minded surrounding land users

Avoid like the plague

- Busy roads
- Noisy or otherwise non-like-minded neighbours
- Commercial or industrial areas—including agriculture/horticulture



Animals

Be they horses, cows, sheep, alpacas or otherwise, you want (and will probably swear that you need) those creatures in your life. Perhaps you'd house them in your suburban backyard if you could, but given that this might get you arrested, you're forced to look for appropriate rural land.

You want largely cleared land. Trees generally stifle pasture and cropping (although see the section on agroforestry in Chapter 14), and horses will usually ringbark them so they'll die or need expensive and time-consuming maintenance. And since in many rural areas there are now restrictions on removing trees and bushland, clearing land for your animals or pasture will likely be fraught with obstacles.

Deep soils will give you the best chance of establishing that Holy Grail of perennial pasture (see Chapters 6 and 7). Some undulation will insure you through the various seasons—low-lying areas will become your dry-season grazing 'larders' while you'll be thankful for that higher country during heavy rains and freak flooding. Without this variety you'll probably come unstuck at least once in a typical year. (Don't go nuts here, though—overly steep land will make grazing difficult.) Make sure the local government doesn't restrict keeping animals in the area (such as for groundwater protection purposes), and if you plan to keep horses, check the nature of the surrounding area if you want to do any offsite riding.

Ideal characteristics

- Largely cleared land
- Deep soils
- Some undulation, including some higher country

Avoid like the plague

- Lots of trees or bush
- Rocky, shallow soils or sands
- Overly steep land
- Sensitive groundwater areas
- Surrounding areas unsuitable for riding (if you plan to keep horses)

Commercial enterprise

Perhaps there's a tycoon or three in your family tree—maybe even an agricultural baron!—and you believe good land should not be wasted but made to turn a profit. You might be interested in a mixture of land uses, including animals, tree or pasture crops and perhaps accommodation or tourism.

What you need to look for is largely cleared land—big chunks of bushland will be a hindrance to you. If you're serious about production then deep, productive soils are a must. And unless your business plan involves breeding Himalayan mountain goats, avoid properties dominated by steep slopes. Very, very little agriculture—be it grazing, cropping, horticulture or forestry—has a chance of succeeding on steep land. It can be great for establishing eco-chalets with a view, but if you have any other commercial use in mind, look for something else. And don't forget to check with the local government for any restrictions on the type of enterprise you want to establish.

Ideal characteristics

- Largely cleared land
- Deep, productive, well drained soils

Avoid like the plague

- Bush blocks
- Shallow, rocky soils
- Steep land
- Land with unsuitable zoning restrictions

Now it's your turn ...

The perfect property: Characteristics to look for

Write down the five non-negotiable characteristics you will need on any property you consider, keeping in mind those listed above for your proposed use as well as things like distance from work and surrounding land uses, now and into the future. You can then use this list to guide your hunt.



Buyer beware! It might look productive but this field of barley grass is actually an indicator of waterlogging and even salinity.

Buyer beware! Some red flags to look out for

Now that you have a good idea of what you’re looking for, the only thing left is to make sure you don’t end up with a whole lot of what you’re not looking for. But how will you know whether you’re about to nab a bargain or be lumbered with a dud? If I knew the precise answer to that question I’d be a very rich man, but I can point out a few clear signs that your seemingly promising purchase is going to come with some nasty surprises.

Red flag	Probable meaning
Curious caveats and lurking covenants	While most such legal instruments might be necessary and quite sensible—even noble—some can be outrageous or at least unacceptably restrictive to your intended purposes. It’s worth having a legal eagle cast an expert eye over all associated documents to ensure that you know exactly what’s wrapped up in the title of that dream (or nightmare!) property.
Lack of power or water on site	Unless you’d be happy living as a permanent ascetic—or you have grand plans to live entirely ‘off the grid’—there’s a good chance that sooner rather than later you’ll want some of each of these. If they are not available on site—and if the nearest supplies are not nearby—then you will find yourself having to shell out big-time for the extension of these essential services to your property.
Fencing in poor condition	Without both boundary and internal fencing that’s in very good condition—especially if you want to keep animals, or even if your neighbours have animals—you will be up for some urgent and hefty costs.
Hard, uneven ground	This is a sign that the soil is probably heavy clay and prone to waterlogging—not a good choice if you’re planning to grow crops or pastures. (We’ll cover soils in detail in Chapter 6; for now, just watch out for the basic warning signs listed here.)
Rocks near the surface	Look out: this soil is prone to erosion, so it will be difficult and expensive to make a go of grazing or cropping here. It might be okay for returning to bushland or for certain tree crops, though, and the rocks might also be a good source of building materials for any eco-chalets you have in mind.
Bare, sandy soil	This site has been overgrazed. Low-fertility, drought-prone and water-repellent soils are susceptible to erosion. They are easy and cheap to work, but a high-production grazing enterprise will be difficult to sustain.
‘Fluffy’, bare soil with thin growth	Danger! This soil is likely to suffer from salinity problems; at the very least it will be waterlogged, compacted and out of balance (see Chapter 6). Either way, it will need some serious TLC to get it up and running if you want to grow pretty much anything well. Forget high production here—this will be the domain of specialised trees and pastures, with only limited and controlled grazing possible.

Red flag	Probable meaning
Soil 'mottled' at depth; drains onsite or nearby	If you love lakes and dams then this could be the place for you, but if you're planning a horticultural venture, think again. These features will seriously curtail your grazing, cropping and wet-season vehicle access, and you can expect lots of rainy-season inundation, complete with ducks. Your plants are likely to be underwater for at least a couple of months each year.
Dark green paddocks during the dry months	This land will probably be waterlogged in the wet, but is great for dry-season feed—a real boon for the grazing enthusiast. There might also be plenty of weeds lurking in this obviously productive soil.
Prickly weeds	I will be banging on and on about weeds in later chapters, so it's worth stating my basic position here. While small scatterings of weeds are manageable, if you have plenty of nasty ones and they're hard to control, look out, because they will quickly become a major, time-consuming and potentially expensive problem. Prickly weeds usually reflect mismanagement of the land, which has resulted in soil degradation.
Couch and/or kikuyu grass	These thick and potentially menacing grasses are okay if grazing is your thing—they are good, drought-tolerant pasture grasses—but they will spell headaches for any tree-planting, vegie-growing or horticultural ambitions and could scupper any noble organic food production ventures. Their presence usually means there is moisture within four metres below the surface.
Dead or dying trees	Whoever had this land previously won't win any land stewardship awards. Dead and dying trees can be symptomatic of a whole range of problems, including waterlogging, salinity, overgrazing, dieback and drought stress—all not good, and all suggesting that the land has been overworked and that some careful management and repair work will be required.
Few trees	Once again, the previous owner was no landcare legend. A lack of trees indicates that the site has probably been worked hard and will be prone to wind blasting (baking in hot weather, freezing in cold).



Red flags: Step away from the property!

Once you're at the stage of seriously considering a particular piece of land, write down as much of the following key information as you can about it and its surroundings.

- Soils (see Chapter 6 if you need more detail on soils at this stage)
- Land capabilities
- Land limitations
- Main plants already on the land, including trees, shrubs, grasses and weeds (if you can, take some samples and, if you can't identify them yourself, contact your local agricultural authority or Landcare Officer—who should also have a wealth of other information about the area, including the soils, their capabilities and limitations; see also 'The secret language of weeds' in Chapter 6)
- History (many former farming properties can have chemical residues hiding in the soil)
- Neighbours and neighbouring land uses
- Future plans for the area (the local government will be able to tell you this)

Now go through the table on pages 23–24 and identify any red flags flapping madly in the breeze on your prospective property before making your final decision, so that at the very least you understand exactly what you'd be letting yourself in for.

Although some of the information presented here might seem a little alarming, the take-home message from all of it is simply to know what you're up for, so you know what you're in for! They say that knowledge is power, and it's true—the more information you have under your belt, the better placed you'll be to choose the right property for your specific needs, and then to move happily on to the next stage of your rural dream: planning for a rural life of peace and prosperity.

Opposite: A well planned rural property includes a mix of farmland punctuated by retained and planted vegetation. [Image courtesy Amy House]

