

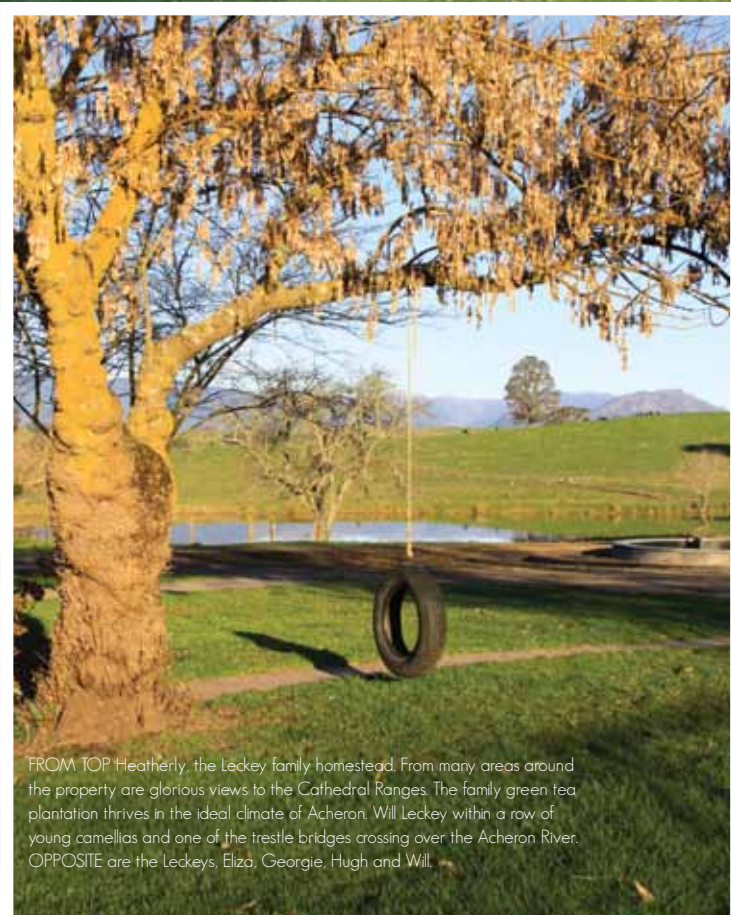
A full-page photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a family of four (a man, a woman, and two children) are walking across a lush green field. A black and tan dog is running ahead of them. The field is bordered by a wooden fence. In the background, there are rolling green hills, a large tree, and distant mountains under a clear sky. The scene is reflected in a body of water in the lower half of the image.

# Wide open *spaces*

FRAMED ON ONE SIDE BY THE CATHEDRAL RANGES AND NEAR TO WHERE THE GOULBURN AND ACHERON RIVERS MEET AT ACHERON, THE LECKEY FAMILY HAVE CREATED A FAMILY OASIS WITH A HOME BASED FIRMLY IN TRADITION BUT A BUSINESS THAT IS LOOKING TO THE FUTURE.

WORDS Melissa Hiatt-Boyle PICTURES Celeste Faltyn





FROM TOP: Heatherly, the Leckey family homestead. From many areas around the property are glorious views to the Cathedral Ranges. The family green tea plantation thrives in the ideal climate of Acheron. Will Leckey within a row of young camellias and one of the trestle bridges crossing over the Acheron River. OPPOSITE are the Leckys, Eliza, Georgie, Hugh and Will.



In a time when many Australian farmers are faced with the need to diversify in order to survive; the Leckey's, and their homestead are thriving examples of resilience.

Will Leckey began working his family's 890 acre cattle and sheep farm in 1991. And he and partner Georgie took over the care of the 1920s farmhouse in 1998. During the depths of the drought they thought about moving to a larger farm in isolated Queensland. Considering all options, they secured an opportunity with Ito En, a Japanese company looking for Australian farmers to grow green tea for export to Japan. Almost ten years later they are noticeably excited and grateful for the opportunities opening up to them.

Will's enthusiasm is contagious as he gives a tour of the tea plantation. The property was a perfect find. Four kilometres from the homestead the 110 acres are on a natural island at the junction of the Goulburn and Acheron Rivers. The soil is rich and free draining. He is one of three farmers in the Alexandra area contracted to Ito En. The altitude is ideal for quality green tea, as the plants need to go through a period of dormancy during Winter.

Will planted 160,000 *Camellia Sinensis* (tea) plants just after their daughter Eliza was born in 2001. "They're now both thriving," Georgie laughs. "Initially the tea wasn't. We had a really hot October and November that year and the problem was we had a drip irrigation system and had trouble getting water to the plants in that first six week period. So these tiny plants were stressed and Will was stressed."

"It was a steep learning curve coming from a grazing background to horticulture," he said. A Japanese farmer for Ito En has been to the property to offer advice and Will has been to the processing plant in Japan several times. "The

Japanese are very patient and far sighted," said Will.

Attractive silvery green tea plants in several neat hedgerows stretch over thirty acres with a view to the Cathedral Ranges. Normally thier flock of sheep meander down the rows of tea and help keep the grass and weeds down. It was four years before the plants were mature enough to harvest, but the plants last around one hundred years.

"They're a hardy plant, sustainable and easy to manage," said Will, "There's no replanting and we've never had to spray for pests. We use an IPM approach (Integrated Pest Management) to dealing with problems. It's not organic but it's using principles that organic farmers might use."

The main challenges have been with irrigation and the threat from frost. He points out a large pump house that will make all the difference this year, with the new overhead sprinkler and frost protection system, and explains how it works. As well as a moisture probe the new system measures the temperature. If a freeze is eminent the sprinklers pop up out of the bushes automatically. "They all go at once. Ice forms wherever it falls on the leaves and it keeps layering and layering. The process of freezing releases heat and so what's under is protected. It's like being in an igloo. It keeps going until the sun comes up and melts the ice."

The threat of frost is really only critical during September and October, the first and crucial harvest of the season. Three varieties of *Camellia Sinensis* were planted, the only difference between the varieties is harvest times which is a useful as a management strategy. A machine used for harvest, dubbed 'Tea Beast', straddles one hedgerow at a time. It cuts and blows the leaves into a hopper. The leaves are loaded into bins which have air blowing underneath to





A simple colour palette decorates the main living room and opposite is the equally stylish dining room and the family room full with family treasures and displaying Georgie's affinity with texture and colour.



keep it fresh. It is then transported to the factory in Japan.

Japanese green tea is steamed, to keep it from oxidising, and then dried. "It's all done in a way that replicates the way it has been done by hand over the years, as if you're rolling it and then tossing it up. It's quite a performance really."

The first harvest, Sincha, due to the winter dormancy, contains more nutrients and because the leaves are softer require less steaming creating a more pure unadulterated flavour. With each harvest during the season the tea takes on different characteristics and are used to produce a variety of green tea.

"People have been asking, 'Can we try your tea?', so we thought lets give it a go," said Georgie. Up until now all of their harvests have gone to Ito En. Will approached the company who are supportive of the Leckey's selling thier own tea. Two Rivers Green Tea will soon be available for purchase online and is already available at a boutique tea emporium in Mansfield.

The main property, where the Leckey's call home, is named Heatherly. Grapevines frame, and soften the broad verandas that surround the farmhouse nestled in a private

valley. Near the house is a beautiful wooden shed from the late 1800s which is the oldest building in the area. Will and Georgie Leckey had their wedding pictures taken in front of the building. Other outbuildings include a large shed housing items such as seven year old Hugh's mini bike used to help his dad "hunt cattle"; a small stable for nine year old Eliza's pony, Bella; and in the back garden near the tennis court is a pavilion.

The pavilion is an addition Will and Georgie designed. At its base the handsome structure has a pattern made with mondo grass and climbing the frame are ornamental grapevine for colour in autumn and wisteria for spring.

Several sculptures by Yea artist Gilbert Dawson have made their home in the garden. A bird's nest constructed of barbed wire with eggs carved from stone is Georgie's favourite. She plans to commission the artist to recreate a work of his she already owns, but on a larger scale for the meadow near the dam.

Sitting areas have been created in wicker, iron and wood; at the dam in front of the house, around the veranda and throughout the garden. "It's all about pondering and





The Leckey children Hugh and Eliza enjoy everything country life brings. And, opposite page is the restored front entry door and the entrance foyer to the faithfully renovated homestead.



"It's all about pondering and appreciating where you are."



appreciating where you are," said Georgie. "We try and keep everything in perspective with its environment. It's something I've learned from my mother-in-law, Barbara. The garden is all about this," she gestures toward the view all around. "Often you can build a garden and enclose yourself in. What we're trying to do is bring the valley into our garden with our vistas."

As well as helping with the family farm, Georgie also runs Heatherly Designs, a company in which she designs custom made, upholstered bedheads. It is Georgie's design sensibility that has encompassed the whole house. Touches of blue, an element of the interior colour theme, have been brought out to the veranda and on into the garden. The illusion of connectedness with the outdoors is enhanced with paintings of flowers from the garden done by Will's mother, and through minor renovations the house is open to natural light and the surrounding views.

Two extensions on the farmhouse were completed by Will's parents, but the original section of the house with its rustic red pine floor boards, high ceilings and beadboard wainscoting in the dining room, have remained relatively unchanged. The renovations Georgie and Will have undertaken, such as replacing the solid front door with one that would allow light in, was equally respectful of the history

of the farmhouse. "We like the history of the place so we wanted to keep the feel," said Will.

The couple's current home improvement project is the forecourt. Will has created a fountain within a circular drive. The centrepiece is a sculpture he made for his mother fifteen years ago. Constructed from pieces of old farm machinery the sculpture adds a rustic touch to the fountain. "We wanted to connect with the dam, water is so important and the fountain is our way of trying to bring it a little closer," said Georgie. The drive will be finished off with white gravel bordered with lawn. By November between the drive and the dam the wild meadow will blossom with snow drops. "People say they'd like to live on a deserted island. This is our deserted island, this valley. You can come up our road and have left everything behind," said Georgie.

The homestead is not entirely a hidden treasure. In November, Will and his family open their garden and this year their green tea plantation will also be open to the public as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme. Local produce and Devonshire tea will be available to purchase with all profits going to the local school.

For more details on the Heatherly Open Garden and Two Rivers Green Tea Plantation open day, visit [www.tworiversgreentea.com.au](http://www.tworiversgreentea.com.au)





## *Lovely things*

Warm and inviting, Heatherly exudes cool country charm and with Georgie's design smarts, every inch of the home has interesting focal points. The work of local artists pepper the gardens and, Georgie has combined the old with the new, the chic and the traditional with flair, such as the elegant tea setting used to serve their home grown green tea. Family collectibles such as vintage golf clubs and wicker baskets are constant reminders of the ongoing legacy at Heatherly.

