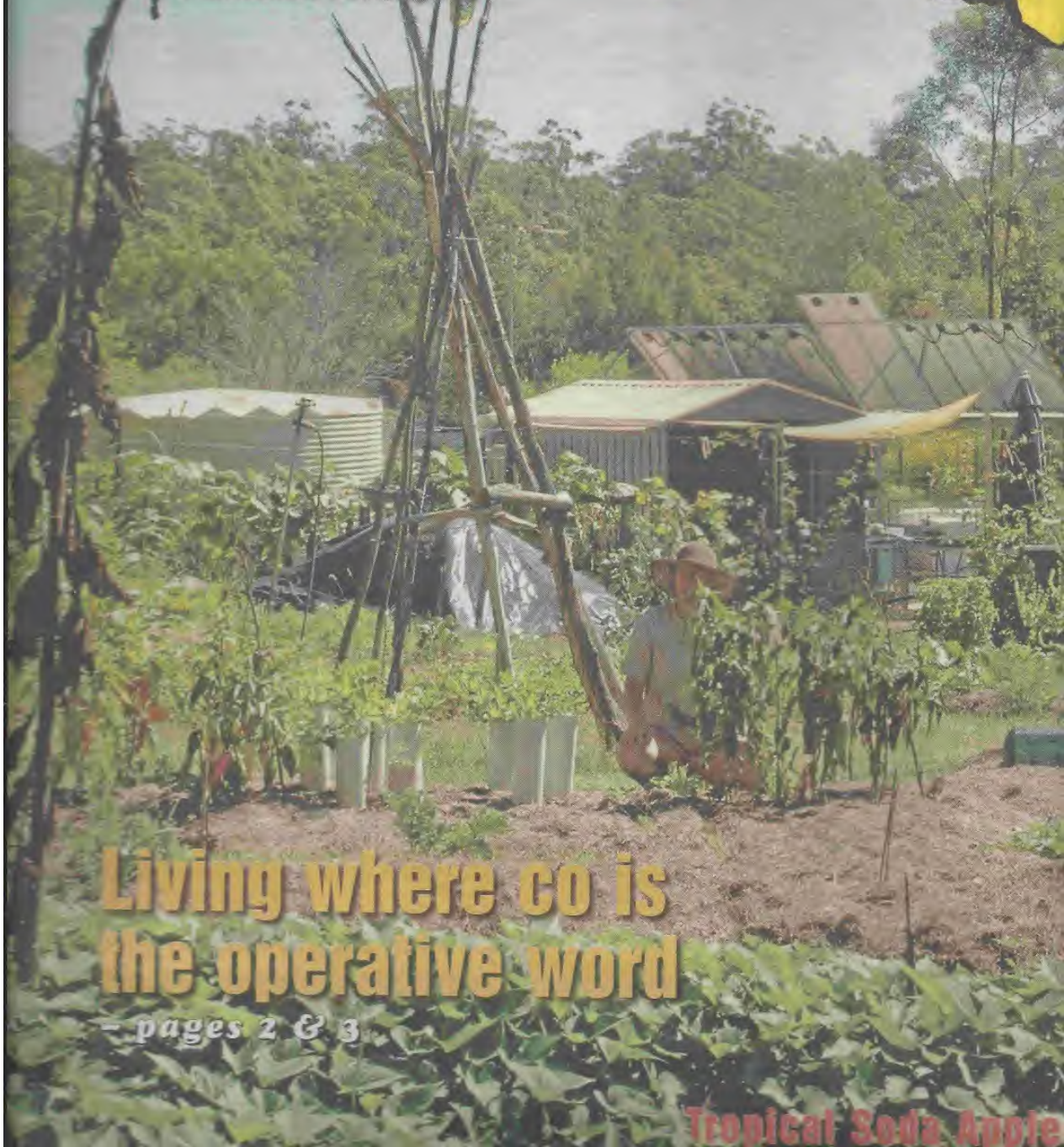


NORTH COAST Town & Country

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Our Farmers. Our



**Living where co is
the operative word**

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Tropical Soda Apple

Local, global focus for co-op residents

By Mark Gallagher

YOU can't have a cat or a dog but you can have half a hectare of your own and a stake in an all-organic five square kilometres of coastal bushland – that's if you're a member of the Goolawah land co-operative.

Located north of Port Macquarie, near Crescent Head, the Goolawah Co-operative Ltd is just that – a jointly owned piece of land with 78 shareholders who are entitled to live on half-hectare blocks clustered in a number of "hamlets" laid out much like regular subdivisions.

Established in 2000, the co-op says it is now close to finalising a Development Application under State Environmental Planning Policy 5 legislation, applying to rural land-sharing communities, and which restricts building and development to areas of land previously cleared.

The Goolawah co-op was initially set up by members of another rural land sharing co-operative, Bundagen, near Coffs Harbour, but operates independently and decisions are made democratically by shareholders.

So, while in theory members can change anything at Goolawah – apart from its non-profit co-operative legal structure – in reality some of its current regulations and practices are fundamental to its existence and form its philosophical foundations, *Town & Country* is told.

Residents Paul Martin and Anne Wilson are very enthusiastic about Goolawah and land co-operatives in general, so much so that their holiday



INDEPENDENCE: Goolawah co-op resident Paul Martin in his raised-bed herb and veg garden.

last year consisted of attending the Global Ecovillage Network Europe conference and visiting "eco villages" in Europe.

Paul says he "came away very inspired and impressed with how advanced co-operative infrastructure and living arrangements have become in western countries". Ecovillages were named among the United Nations' top 100 Best Practices in 1998, and as excellent models of sustainable living in its *Global Environmental Outlook 2000*, he says, and since then the Global Ecovillage Network has re-

ceived European Union funding every other year to promote ecovillages.

This environmental and sustainable approach underpins the co-op's existence and appeal to many people, Paul says. So, for wildlife conservation reasons, cats, dogs and firearms are banned from the property, organic gardening and growing practices are obligatory, composting toilets are mandatory and, at least in some parts of the co-op, connection to the electricity grid is not allowed.

But apart from that people largely suit themselves, Paul says.

The 78 shares are all taken, but can be bought and sold. Shares cost \$7000, and joining fees and other expenses push membership outlays up to about \$13,500, plus the value of any improvements that may be involved. Members also pay an annual general levy of \$500 and another \$500 road levy.



RIGHT OF WAY: The absence of dogs and cats on the co-op makes life easier for native and domestic animals.

BELOW: The co-op entrance.



It's a lifestyle choice

PEOPLE join co-operative ventures such as Goolawah for a range of reasons, but was the main incentive usually a financial one? asked *Town & Country*.

"Ah, it's usually the wrong incentive – if they're coming here just for that, then they're usually the people that don't work out. It's a lifestyle choice . . ." Paul Martin says.

"It's a big one, you can't get away from it, it is a big one . . . it's the difference, for a lot of people, between 10 years' mortgage (commitment) . . .

"But generally it's not the right motivation . . . It's more for people who want to be more social, who want to know their neighbours . . . they want a 'kid safe environment', like a place with no fences, rather than just get automatically a fence . . . and 'oh maybe there'll be somebody nice here'. Here it's the other way around – there's no fence but if you're going to put a fence up . . . it would be very odd for that to happen. You'd have to have a real breakdown with relationships for that to happen.

"A lot of people use it when they like to travel – that's a cost thing again, I guess, because you don't have so much money tied up in land . . . so

they use it as a base."

"Look at our example," Anne Wilson says, "I'm 29, Paul's – I should know that – 34, we've got a house and no mortgage. That is incredible freedom. I don't know anyone else my age that has that – well I don't have any mates that have inherited, as well – that's the only other way I can think of of doing that.

"So I mean, we also don't have kids, so we've got massive freedom from that, but it means that I don't have to work full-time – I can work part-time and spend the rest of my time doing stuff that I really like to do – um well, which is mainly finishing off the house at the moment – but it means I'm not too burnt out at the end of the week . . . It makes it a lot easier."

Paul says that over the 10 years he has owned the share in Goolawah they have spent about \$200,000 on the house and land, sheds, gardens, water supply, solar power system – the works. Building the house themselves and not having to buy an expensive separate block of land has meant a saving of \$300,000 or \$400,000, he says.

"It's not no-cost, but it's low cost," he says.

Co-operation the key word

“GOOLAWAH land sharing co-operative is located part-way between Port Macquarie and Crescent Head in NSW, approximately 4.5 hours drive north of Sydney,” co-op website www.goolawah.org says.

“Started in 2000, we are working to create a community that encourages self sufficiency in an affordable rural setting.

“Our aims include promoting organic produce and permaculture, alternative technology, arts and music, and respect for the environmental values of this unusual and very special place.”

These are the sort of values that are expected to appeal to prospective members, long-time resident Paul Martin tells *Town & Country*. Aside from checking that potential members have no serious criminal record, the co-op has little in the way of formal screening processes, Paul says, although current members are given the opportunity by ballot to veto an application.

People wishing to buy into the co-op are asked for some sort of reference from another co-op, shared house or other environment where they have had to co-operate with other people. New members, who have to buy out an existing shareholder, are basically expected to “self select”, Paul says, by gaining a good understanding of what the co-op does and does not offer and provide.

“We pretty much want to let people see what it’s all about – if it’s for them,” he says.

Some people advise co-ops to do financial checks on applicants, as well as the police checks, he says, but Goolawah decided against that



HOME SWEET HOME: Paul Martin and Anne Wilson with their owner-built home on their block at the Goolawah land co-op.

BELOW: Anne with the automated watering system in their herb and vegetable garden that lets them leave it unattended for a few days.



“More to the point, references from where you’ve lived before, what co-ops you might have been involved with before, that’s the biggest mechanism we have to vet out people who are just burning their bridges everywhere – going from one broken place to another – because if they know that we’re going to check up where they’ve been . . . then they won’t even apply,” he says. He does not like terms such as “commune” or “intentional community” being used to describe the property, believing they give people a false impression – it’s a rural land co-operative, he says.

Paul, a director of the Goolawah co-op, and his partner Anne Wilson, the co-op’s secretary, are keen to see more people moving to the property

as full-time residents. Although there are 78 paid-up shareholders, at present only about 20 adults and nine children live there full-time, Anne says.

More full-time residents would help to build up the “critical mass” needed to advance the co-op to the next stage, they say, enabling further development of facilities such as a community centre for functions and performances and services like food buying co-ops.

At present many shareholders spend only part of the year on the property, visiting on weekends or for holidays or just occasionally, while some are never sighted at all, Paul says.

He and Anne would like to see more young families with children move in, describing it as “a child friendly environment”, which in time could even have its own school.

As it is, the property is “within commuting distance” of seven high schools, he says, which helps to explain the presence of several teachers among the current residents.

However there are a range of other occupations represented in the co-op’s residents, including on-site business operators, contractors, retired people and home-based workers.

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HOME MADE:
The co-op's members meeting room.

OUR COVER:
Co-op resident Mairead at work in her veg garden.

Farmers needed

GOOLAWAH Co-op residents are hoping that someone with serious horticulture ambitions will join the project.

At present there is a strong emphasis on residents' domestic food gardens, but so far no one has turned up with burning desire to establish a commercial orchard or market garden.

"We're very keen to find people like market gardeners," resident Paul Martin tells Town & Country.

"People that want to do things like organic market gardening. We're just waiting for people who are keen to come along and start

it up. We've got the land, we've got the motivation . . . we've got the support from members – people are thinking it would be great, but we want the person and/or people who will actually do it."

In the meantime the co-op is doing its bit

for self sufficiency.

Along with some impressive veg gardens and backyard orchards, members are planting fruit and nut trees in big numbers around the communal areas of the co-op. But with 1600 or so acres available, there's plenty of scope for more.

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