

## FastStart Cotton Establishment Awards scooped by savvy, new starters

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FastStart Cotton Establishment dryland category winner Mitchell Brimblecombe (left) with CSD Extension and Development Agronomist Chris Barry.

Years of tradition and acquired knowledge might ordinarily be considered mandatory to establish cotton crops worthy of winning one of Australia's most exciting crop competitions.

The two winners of the 2020 - 21 FastStart Cotton Establishment Awards pushed themselves outside of their comfort zone, drawing on the latest tools, techniques and advice with outstanding results.

"Given that this was my first-time growing cotton, I'm really excited to win the Award," said dryland category winner Mitchell Brimblecombe.

The family farm, 'Moirra' in Forest Hill, QLD, had not produced a single cotton plant in 21 years, prior to this season. Despite the long hiatus, Mitchell said he had plenty of knowledge at his fingertips through FastStart, which resulted in a (Planter Uniformity Index) PUI of 0.05 and 81.8% establishment.

"The FastStart cotton program gave us the tools and advice we needed to give our crop the best chance of success," Mitchell said.

The competition doesn't assess outright yield, instead emphasising establishment and the foundations for an efficient crop, managing early yield limiting impacts. Planter uniformity and evenness of the emerging crop are key criteria that strongly align with FastStart principles. Growers are encouraged to adjust their row configuration and seeding rates for optimum seedling performance as a foundation for optimum efficiency and eventually yield.

"We planted on minimal moisture and while we got some very welcome post plant rain the crop hasn't had a lot of follow-up and has struggled a little. I'm happy that we went with a single skip option," explained Mitchell, with flowering still to come.

The awards are conducted by CSD and Syngenta Australia as an extension of their research and development program, FastStart Cotton, which celebrated its 10th anniversary last year.

The awards were launched in 2018 and have featured a winning dryland and irrigated cotton grower each year since.



**The FastStart Cotton program puts a suite of tools at the fingertips of growers. Pictured right is Mark Cowley, winner of the irrigated category.**

The irrigated category winner for 2020 – 21 also hails from Queensland, within the Brisbane Valley.

"It's taking a while to sink in that we actually won this, considering we are small compared to the average cotton producer. I still can't believe it," Mark Cowley of Toogoolawah said.

While Mark said there was some "luck and patience" involved, he credited CSD Extension and Development Agronomist Chris Barry, and the agronomy team at CGS – including John Ash – for their outstanding knowledge and support.

This approach produced a PUI of 0.004 and 97.6% establishment.

Due to cotton's cold intolerance, Mark made good use of the FastStart Soil Temperature Network and

Traffic Light System before hitching up the Norseman planter.

“No matter what you’re growing, seedling establishment should be at the top of everyone’s agenda,” Mark said.

Incredibly, Mark embraced an added degree of difficulty, opting to plant his crop into a 5ft tall multi-species cover crop. A firm believer in “healthy soils being productive soils”, he utilised sequestered nitrogen and only a single liquid fertiliser application at planting.

“It’s not an easy thing to do to take generations of farming knowledge and put it aside to try something new.”

CSD General Manager – Growth and Development, James Quinn, thanked this year’s entrants while congratulating Mitchell and Mark.

“Achieving even establishment of a cotton crop isn’t easy but it is critical in getting the crop off to a good start. This can influence the development of the crop and ultimately, yield and quality at picking,” he said.

The awards support growers in their continuous work to improve the production of their crops. Past winners have participated in a study tour of agricultural enterprises within the Ord River irrigation system. Organisers remain hopefully the trip could go ahead after COVID-19 forced them into a hiatus last year.

“There are many growers out there doing a fantastic job of optimising their seedling establishment through the utilisation of the technology and tools that FastStart is providing,” said Syngenta Seedcare Technical Services Lead, Sean Roberts.

“We want to recognise and celebrate this as best practice cotton farming. The Awards are a great way of doing this, as well as sharing what best practice looks like with other growers.”

FastStart Cotton research and development is funded through the proceeds of each bag of seed sold through CSD, which comes with the added protection of [Syngenta Seedcare™ treatments](#).

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