

SEND YOUR RATS PACKING

Q: What do weed control, planting trees, and owls have in common?

A: They all help control rats in cane paddocks.

If you farm anywhere between Mossman and Bundaberg (with the exception of the Burdekin), in the past you've probably experienced damage from rats and tried to control it with commercial rat bait. And you probably still had rats. But did you know that there are other, more natural ways to deal with this pest that are effective and won't cost you a bundle?

The first step is to control weeds in and around your paddocks. Through eliminating weeds, you will remove a high-energy food source for rats. You also remove their hiding and breeding places. These safe harbours – or harbourage areas – are usually found along your headlands or along stream banks.

You could slash, graze, or spray but that's a lot of work and it needs to be done every season. Burning only encourages the growth of more weeds and grasses and doesn't kill many rats (they burrow).

So what's the answer? Plant trees (that's step 2).

As the trees grow, the canopy (treetop foliage) closes in to form a dense cover. Sun can't get in, so grasses don't grow. No grasses mean there is no home for rats, so they move on.

Encouraging owls is step 3. If you took a spotlight and went outside at night, you may be surprised to see owls hunting in and around your canefields. They like to eat rats and will stay around if you encourage them by providing nest boxes and artificial perches in the fields. Five species of owls are known to hunt in cane. They include the barn owl, barking owl, southern boobook, masked owl, and eastern grass owl.