

Cupid on the farm

MELISSA KENT

Ashley Lewis is a strapping, outdoorsy type who works hard and loves his mum. Oh, and he is a millionaire.

For any woman, Lewis would be a great catch — but add “wheat and sheep farmer” to that description and suddenly his chances of finding true love are considerably reduced.

The Wickiepin farmer’s hard-luck story when it comes to relationships is hardly uncommon in rural WA. Beyond the cities around Australia, the shortage of women is emerging as one of the most pressing problems facing the bush.

Lewis is one of the WA stars of *Desperately Seeking Sheila*, a reality-style series by Perth production company Artemis International which investigated the issue by playing Cupid to a handful of bush bachelors.

Artemis managing director Brian Beaton said an ABC radio program promoting a WAFarmers forum on the outback love drought was the inspiration for the series.

“I had read about the problem before but it wasn’t until I heard that program that something triggered that it was an issue worth investigating,” Beaton said.

“The original idea was to do a one-hour documentary about four bachelors trying to find partners through dating agencies, online websites and B and S balls, that type of thing.

“But it quickly became apparent that it would be better if we took a match-maker role and set it up ourselves. Not only would we have more control, but it would give us access to a wider audience.”

With the blessing of WAFarmers, Artemis and British co-producer Carlton Productions put the call out for lovelorn rural men and single city women from Perth and Britain last October.

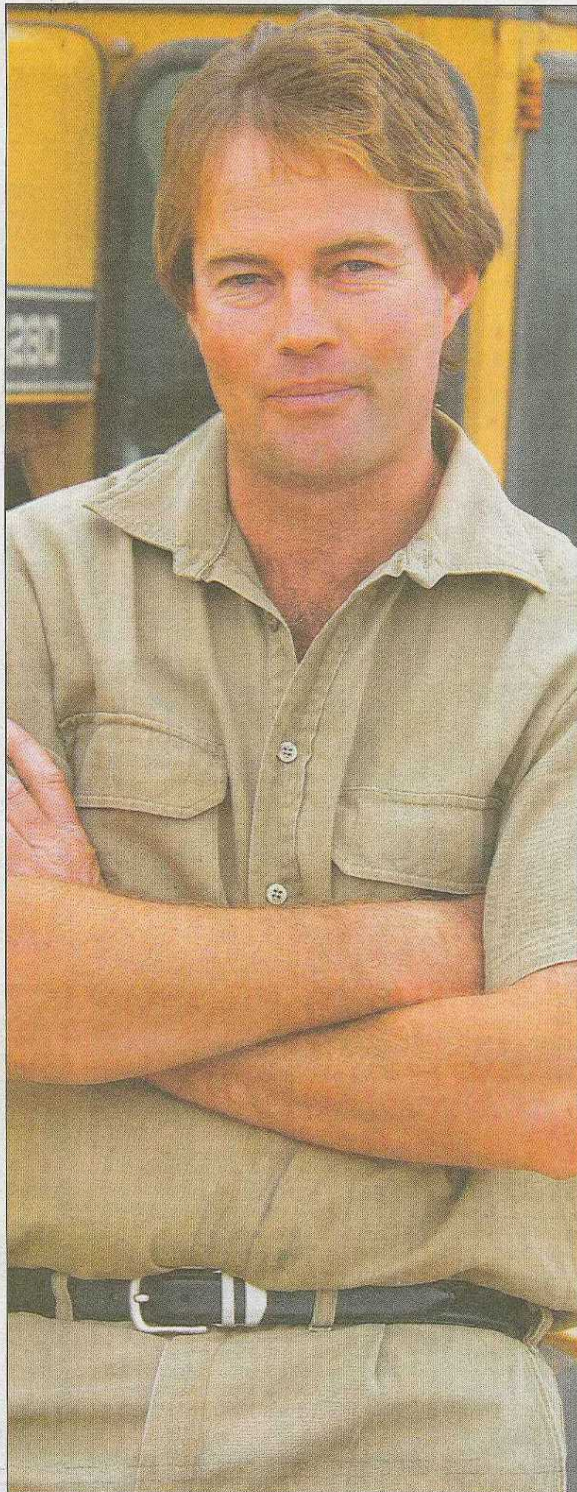
The response took even the producers by surprise. More than 1200 attractive, eligible British women turned up to a casting call in London, desperate to be part of the series.

Six WA men from a field of 70 were selected for the enviable task of choosing three women for a dinner date, and finally taking one home for a taste of country life.

Longtime single farmer Lewis, who lives with his widowed mother on their 1450ha property, chose a 25-year-old Englishwoman to take home to Wickiepin.

Just how she handles WA farm life will be revealed as the series unfolds.

Lewis said the lack of opportunities for women in the country was the biggest factor affecting the rural love drought.



Ashley Lewis... chose a 25-year-old Englishwoman to take home to Wickiepin.

“Guys have the farm but for girls it’s much harder when it comes to employment opportunities,” he said.

“I put my hand up because I thought it would be a bit of fun and if I could introduce some new girls into the district, so much the better.”

Last year SBS came under fire over its commissioning of the series, with critics claiming a dating-style program was a breach of the broadcaster’s charter to provide multicultural television.

Beaton said while the concept had obvious entertainment value it was also a genuine attempt to help rural men find love.

“Our prime concern was to provide a shortlist of women that

really suited our men,” he said.

“A lot of that criticism came from people who knew nothing about the program. We want to let people make up their own mind about whether it’s a dating program, a documentary or a drama. We definitely don’t think it’s a reality series because it’s not a game show. It’s not like they win a prize at the end.”

They may not walk away with a cash prize or recording contract, but some of our bachelors win a prize of a different kind: a sheila.

Desperately Seeking Sheila, 730pm, Sunday, SBS.