

Phyto farming

A grand vision, a lot of preparation and a farm dedicated to growing organic herbs and teaching people how to use them; it's part of the plan for Valmai Becker and her plant farm, as Jenny Somervell discovers.

The idea of a herb farm first germinated for Valmai Becker while she was a practicing naturopath, thinking about teaching people in the right environment.

The 'right environment' would include spas, good food, hydro therapy and, of course, herbs. A grand vision, but she soon realised that to do this in the 1980s on her three acres in Akaroa 'was going to cost a million dollars'.

So in 2001, when she bought 12 hectares in Little River, it was important to make the vision achievable. Initially she thought of creating a big herb garden, with the long-term vision of living full time on her property.

However, the idea of a working example of a comprehensive herb farm managed on an organic, sustainable basis began to grow.

"Don't you get tired?" I ask. Now embarking on her fourth business, 50 year old Valmai is candid about her abilities.

"I have a lot of energy for a new project," she says. "I thrive on coming up with new ideas. But sometimes the grind of getting there can be a little hard."

The sustainable part was interesting. Valmai describes her first foray into

commercial herb growing as not very successful. The 5000 echinacea plants she planted grew well, but so did the twitch, snails and rabbits.

"I put down woollen weed mat. It was dark and moist and a vast haven for slugs which came out and ate the crowns of the plants. I tried lots of things to stop them but they didn't work. In the end I used pea straw – it was rough on their bodies."

Looking back, Valmai can see it was a typical example of beginner's enthusiasm.

"Here I was trying to run a business in town and manage a full time project at Phytofarm."

While still keen to grow a crop, she now sees this as going on the backburner until her core business is established: medicinal herb workshops, based around a large herb garden.

"I'm pretty much on target. My business card and website are done, my promotional material is going out."

Behind her promotional material is solid ground work: the building of a herb workshop, a herb-drying room, a tractor shed, and a self-contained sleep-out. And behind that, the work you don't see: building consents, sewage and drainage systems, roads and electricity.

Valmai's vision for the workshops is 'hands on'. Participants come into the environment to identify, harvest and dry plants, make teas, tinctures, vinegars, medicinal honeys, creams, ointments, salves, medicinal syrups, bath mixtures, infused oils and even wild weed salads. Workshops are plant-based, so the model is seasonal – in summer, aerial plant parts are harvested; in autumn, berries and seeds; in winter, dried plant material and roots.

Like many successful business people, Valmai's vision is combined with a hard realism and strong organisational and management skills.

"I was only 17 and my father wanted me to get an education, So I made a deal with him. I would go to business college for a year. And so I did!"

She has used those skills ever since. So an imminent visit from the bank manager doesn't phase Valmai at all. In fact, revising her business plan inspired her.

Valmai aims to grow the full 'Materia Medica' of 140 medicinal plants for therapeutic value on her site. Many of these are already established in a large, heart-shaped medicinal herb garden below the workshop shed.

When Valmai talks about her 'big herb garden' she is actually talking way beyond the square; she is talking about the whole property.

Sloping and north-facing, the property boasts a range of micro-climates, enabling a diverse range of species to be grown. The upper 60% of the property is in forest, multi-leveled and self-sustaining, alongside valleys of manuka.

Planted 10 years before Valmai purchased the farm, it includes stands of about 150 redwoods, 80 red alders, 80 Tasmanian blackwoods and 40 chestnuts. She reckons plants such as ginseng and goldenseal, which require up to 90% shade, could be grown under trees in natural shade and moisture.

A natural watercourse running down from the hills provides another ecosystem. Medicinal and nutritional pasture herbs already abound naturally in situ including yarrow (*Achillea*), dandelion, shepherd's purse, plantain, red clover and milk thistle.

Three hundred or so native medicinal plants have already been planted: ake ake, flax, lacebark and kawakawa. Other medicinal trees include Chaste tree (*Vitex agnus-castus*) and 150 ginkgo (*Ginkgo*

Name: Valmai Becker

Lives: Phytofarm ('plant farm'), Akaroa

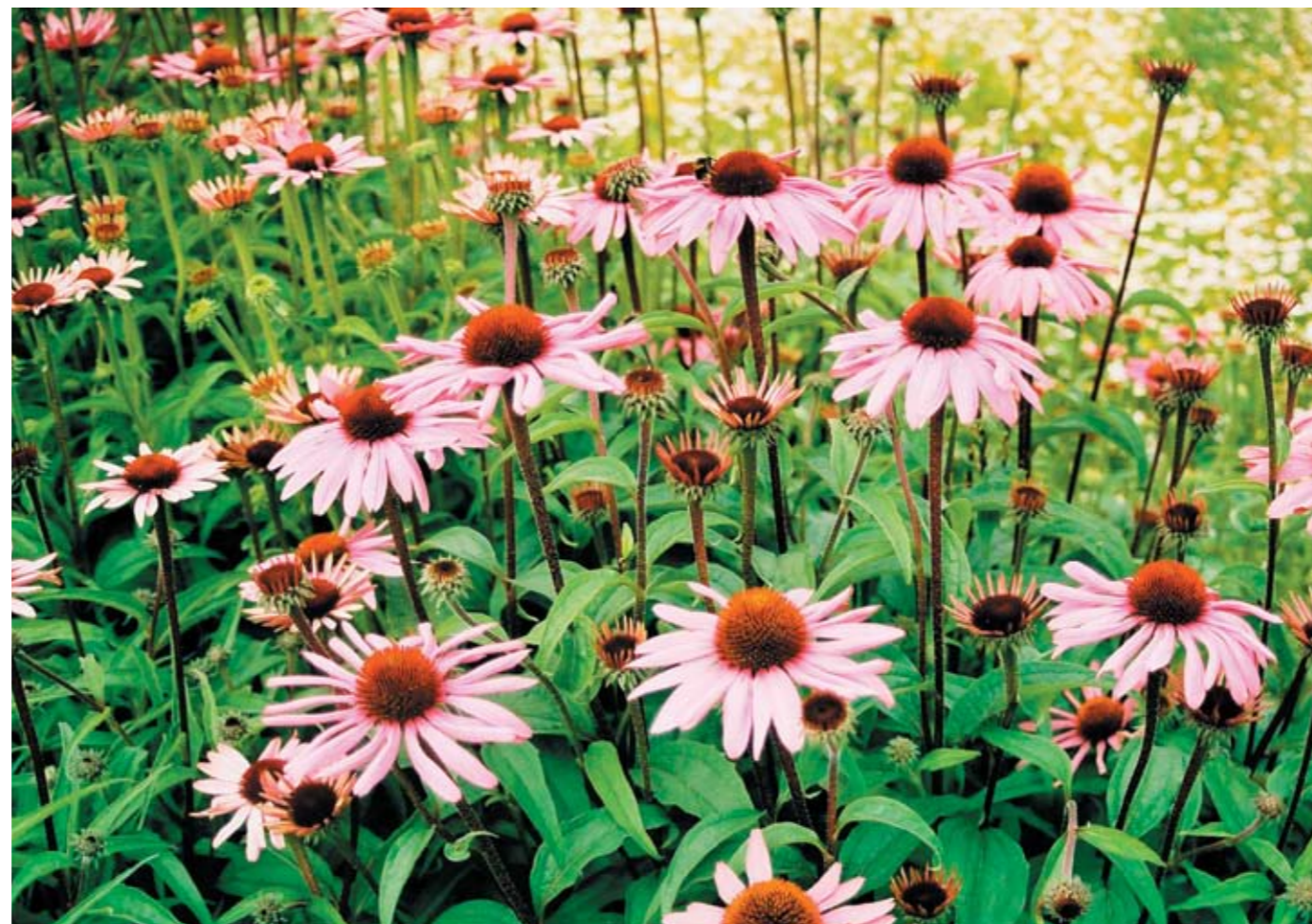
Job: Naturopath, herb farmer, teacher



All about Valmai

Valmai is used to 'vertical learning curves' - you might say she thrives on them. When she graduated in 1980 as a trained naturopath, the idea that a person's whole environment - their nutrition, lifestyle, mind and emotions - all combined to create wellness or sickness, was, in Valmai's words, 'fairly new thinking'. Applying it to people's lives in practice was sometimes uphill work. She would say, "it would be good to put a few dandelion leaves in your salad" and people would say "ooh, I couldn't do that!" So she worked hard to inspire and engage clients and saw amazing results. That same pioneering spirit led her to establish an ambitious restaurant

in Akaroa based on local ingredients, including home-grown vegetables and a complete absence of white flour or sugar. When the vegetarian fare failed, she found an irresistible venison dish to 'get men in the door' and the restaurant eventually took off. Towards the end of this period, Valmai was invited to write a naturopath programme for the newly established College of Natural Medicine. She was ready for a new challenge but admits now she had "absolutely no idea what she was getting into". Seventeen years later, and much wiser, she was co-owner and director of the college, with 160 students and 35 staff. It was time to move on.



biloba), the fascinating primitive tree that features in Valmai's logo. She believes ginkgo has a future in its role in stimulating blood flow to the brain, assisting memory and concentration.

Valmai sees growing healthy plants as fundamentally the same as growing healthy people. It's all about how they are fed and nurtured. With plants, it starts from the ground up with good soil and good weed management.

She has a plan to make the property fully organic. As she says, no one wants herbs that have been sprayed with chemicals and an organically sustainable property would be an advantage if she ever sold. She sees organics as being about good weed management and design and 'putting up with a little imperfection'. Luckily when she purchased the property, it was relatively weed-free.

She is too much of a realist to be bothered with unsustainable growing.

"Originally I put red rock and clay on the paths but it turned into a major weeding job. Now I just mow it!"

Ironically, Valmai describes herself as not a particularly good gardener.

"I'm a consistently inconsistent person. I tend to do blitzes on things. A good gardener doesn't wait until things are a diabolical mess!"

Valmai illustrates as we walk up the hill towards the

forest area, pointing to a scotch thistle coming into flower.

"This is my discipline here. Not to walk past a plant that is seeding. To do it now!"

Valmai's Ten Tips to Make The Vision Work

1. Talk to others to get good feedback about your ideas.
2. Develop a good vision, goal and plan for your property.
3. Goals should be measurable, realistic, achievable and sustainable, and should enable you to enjoy your property.
4. Create budgets for:
 - Establishment
 - Management
 - Potential business of the property
5. Write a business plan that includes strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to your business idea.
6. Write up goals each year or more frequently if you need motivation.
7. Plan projects on paper first.
8. Review goals and achievements regularly.
9. Be flexible: If Plan A doesn't work, be ready with Plan B and C.
10. Plan a holiday away from the property so you can return with a fresh view.

