

Healthy living *in practice*



Plenty of people pay lip service to the idea that nature knows best.

Lyn McKinnon visits a Canterbury woman who is walking the talk.

On a 12ha block in the Okuti Valley, Banks Peninsula, Valmai Becker has found a property that perfectly supports her passion. Formerly a director of the Canterbury College of Natural Medicine in Christchurch, she now uses her unique phytofarm to grow numerous medicinal plants as a base for workshops teaching the use of herbs and the manufacture of herbal medicines.

The development of the phytofarm is a dream coming true; a modern fusion of farm, garden and cottage, a quirky organic oasis laced with a dash of renaissance style.

A trained naturopath, Valmai says her lifestyle with medicinal plants -- following

the seasons and relating closely to the land – is enormously rewarding.

Converted to the naturopathic philosophy as a teenager, she spent four years studying naturopathy in Sydney and more than 1500 hours in clinical training before graduating in 1980 and moving to Christchurch where she ran her own clinic for several years.

That was followed by two years in London working in a group practice, attending numerous conferences and seminars, and teaching workshops in massage, nutrition and the philosophy of healthy living.

On her way back to New Zealand, she stopped off in India, adding the philosophy of yoga to her knowledge of nutrition, the use of herbal medicines and massage therapy.

Once home, she re-opened her clinic, but found she had to adjust to a very different working environment.

“In 1984 New Zealand, the practice of natural medicine was still in its infancy. Naturopathy was commonly referred to as alternative medicine, a sort of option on the fringe. But I saw it rather as an active choice that in some cases was a valuable complement to conventional medicine.”

During her 30-year involvement in the field, she has seen massive changes in attitude.

“There is now a large body of research into both nutrition and herbal medicine. In the case of herbal medicine, many traditional uses of herbs have now been verified by clinical trials. “

As interest grew, Valmai was approached by a group wanting to set up a college of natural medicine in Christchurch, and this set her off on what she describes as a “steeply vertical learning curve” lasting 17 years.

“Natural medicine had a long way to go before it offered professional education standards,” she says.

“During my years at the college, my main focus was to ensure courses provided high-quality training that included experience in clinical practice under the guidance of experienced tutors.”

With other colleagues, she worked hard developing NZQA national unit standards, but it was a demanding business meeting ministry obligations and funding guidelines. Every year her administration duties took her another step away from living her own dream – to establish her own medicinal plant farm.

The vision becomes reality

In 2001, she found the ideal property: a north facing hillside block in the picturesque Okuti Valley. Formerly owned and planted by Stephen Brailsford, a well-known Christchurch specialist in tree crops, it featured a diverse range of mature



In the front, chamomile for tea. At the rear, echinacea, an immune system remedy.



The spacious dwelling is an ideal place to hold courses

trees including Tasmanian blackwoods, macrocarpa, redwoods, red alder, chestnuts and valleys of manuka and kanuka.

With plenty of regenerating native bush, the property also offered fenced paddocks where wild pasture herbs flourished, and some flat areas for buildings and formal herb gardens.

As she developed the property, Valmai discovered very quickly that lifestyle blocks can be black holes that suck

away the money.

Early on, as she thought through her goals and visions for the place, she decided very clearly where her core business was to lie.

After a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of those goals, she created a plan of buildings and gardens she needed, wrote up a budget for development and management, and clarified her objectives for each of

the next five years.

“Because I am really interested in educational aspects and the opportunity to share my knowledge with others, I wanted the phytofarm to be a model property. My goal is to provide a resource of up to 140 planted species for people who wish to practise plant identification and learn to follow sustainable, organic farming practice.”

Already, her extensive plantings over a large heart-shaped garden complete with an ornate folly around her herb processing and drying shed make an impressive sight in the peak season.

As interested groups tour the gardens, she can explain how fever few helps with migraines and headaches, hops combat insomnia, elecampane assists lung health, meadowsweet is beneficial to the digestion and arthritis, sage is useful for hot flushes and dizziness, valerian root provides a relaxant, marshmallow acts as a cough remedy, echinacea is an immune stimulant, ginkgo trees are venerated in Chinese medicine, and even the humble dandelion is a culinary, as well as medicinal, essential.

Summertime is when the herb crops are at their most exuberant, and it's the time to harvest aerial parts of the plants, such as stems, leaves, flowers and seed pods. Her drying shed is likely to be crammed with bunches of lemon balm and yarrow, and flower-heads of marigold and red clover.

“But the whole property is very much a work in progress, and a project that will keep me interested for a long time.”

“The biggest challenge to date has not been obtaining the right plant species, but keeping up with other development, including planting more trees – like hoheria in a wetland – keeping them weeded and mulched with pea straw, and even just making good weed-free compost is also very time consuming.”

Once a budget has been established, it is important to try to stick to it, she says, and not get trapped trying to establish too many things at once.

Costs with building and development can very easily get out of control.

“With my lack of experience in land management, and essentials like setting up and understanding water and irrigation systems, I have had to accept that I can't do everything and that I do need help with some projects.”



Production phase during the workshop

She has also learned some shortcuts. After starting with gravel paths in the herb gardens, she quickly found grass was easier to maintain.

One day she would like to grow a crop, and in time expects to develop a phytofarm range of products. But at this stage, she is mainly focusing on seasonal medicine making workshops.

Growing, harvesting, drying, processing and making useful products from herbs, and seeing her trees grow and the buildings merging with the environment, has been deeply satisfying, she says.

Although there are only limited opportunities for growing herbs in what is still a very small industry in New Zealand, she enjoys seeing people's excitement as they join in her workshops, and learn how to grow and use their own medicinal plants.

In her purpose-built herb processing shed, Valmai teaches the properties of herbs, and how to use them safely. Students

are shown how to make a combination of decoctions and infusions, and how to prepare herb vinegars, medicated herb

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honey, syrups and first aid salves.

In the summer harvest workshop, Valmai explains how herbal products like

creams, oils, liniments, gels and ointments can be produced.

The winter workshop teaches the philosophy and use of hydrotherapy in combination with herbal medicine. Compresses, inhalations, gargles and aromatic foot and bath preparations are made. The greater knowledge of herbal medicines helps many of her students to become much more discerning about herbal products available elsewhere, she says.

But at the end of the day, in the deluxe medicine making course, the most satisfying part of the experience is likely to be an aromatic herbal bath in a hot tub right in the centre of the herb garden where course members can wallow in the glorious view across the valley. ■

For more information visit www.phytofarm.co.nz

Words and photos by Lyn McKinnon