

# natural woman

Weeds grow everywhere, but if you want to make a business out of them it helps to give them 30 acres to really go wild

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**V**almai Becker's Phytofarm is a long way from the paper shuffling that dominated the last 17 years of her life as joint owner of the Canterbury College of Natural Medicine.

The picturesque 30 acres, located on a sunny slope in the secluded Okuti Valley, 40 minutes east of Christchurch, is where Valmai is establishing a large medicinal herb garden – a restful, revitalising place where she can share the extensive knowledge she has gained over 30 years as a practising naturopath.

The farm is now Valmai's main passion, bringing together her skills as gardener, teacher, organiser and visionary. She's confident that students in her new herbal medicine workshops will relate just as strongly as she does to Phytofarm's stunning location amid rolling green pasture, native bush and dramatic volcanic hills.

"The College of Natural Medicine enabled me to play an active and positive role in helping natural medicine education to develop in New Zealand," she says, "but my real passion has always centred on helping people feel happy and to concentrate on their health positively, rather than on disease.

"I don't take any pills or potions. It's all about having a balanced, healthy, harmonious lifestyle and incorporating the vitamins and minerals present in herbs into our daily nutritional routine."

Valmai has been working towards realising her dream



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of established herbal medicine workshops based around her own large herbal garden since she bought her Okuti Valley land in 2001. She's built an herb workshop shed, an herb drying room, a tractor shed and self-contained sleep-out. A large heart-shaped herb garden is thriving; she's planted an extensive orchard along with 300 native trees that have medicinal benefits, 150 ginkgo trees and 60 bay trees. In addition, she's nurturing wild crops like yarrow, shepherd's purse, dandelions, plantains, milk thistle, docks and elder trees, all of which have exceptional nutritional value.

"A lot of people have difficulty getting the right species of plants for their gardens and one of my aims is to use Phytofarm as a plant identification tool for natural medicine students and workshop participants," says Valmai.

### practical tips for great herbal teas

\* Use fresh or dried herbs infused with water in a teapot used only for herbal tea. Use one heaped teaspoonful to a cup of freshly boiled water and let it stand for eight to 10 minutes.

\* Use aromatic herbs to introduce yourself to herbal tea drinking – for example spearmint, peppermint, lemon verbena, ginger, aniseed or fennel seed, lemon balm.

**summer refresh** Use equal parts of spearmint, lemon thyme, calendula flowers and lemongrass.

**antioxidant berry tea** Use two parts hawthorn and juniper berries to one part rosehip berries.

**spring cleanse** Use equal parts of licorice root, cornsilk, dandelion leaves, oatstraw to one part rosemary.

**autumn blend** Use equal parts lemon grass, red clover blossoms and oatstraw.





**Clockwise from top:**

a Phytofarm gate framed by hops and feverfew; Valmai at work with fennel seed; natural remedies; borage flowers.



Sitting in Phytofarm’s herb workshop – a place of heavenly scents, great views and an intriguing array of herbs in jars – Valmai is clearly excited as she talks about her seasonal workshops and bringing old herbal traditions back into regular use. A picture of lean good health herself, the 50-year-old talks enthusiastically about her intention to “change the culture of herbal teas.”

“I don’t like herbal tea bags. They’re a good bridge for shifting from tea and coffee, but people don’t tend to infuse them long enough to gain the mineral and vitamin benefits. A good herb tea has to steep for at least 15 minutes and it should be taken warm, not hot. I’d like to encourage people to change the way they drink herbal teas – and to teach them how to make their own from plants they can easily grow themselves.”

Fresh lemon verbena, spearmint and peppermint are good places

to start she says – “the lighter aromatic flavours are easier to take in the beginning” – but her workshops will show the many benefits of combining your own dried ingredients to make a streamlined tea to fit specific nutritional or dietary needs.

Valmai agrees that other people are also sharing their knowledge of natural medicine, but she points out that much of that teaching is academic and courses are so intensive that students do not always have the opportunity to gain first hand experience in making medicinal cream, herbal vinegar or tea, herbal soaps or handcreams.

“We need the academic side of natural medicine but I’m very keen to keep the practical side alive as well,” she says.

“I want to encourage people to make the most of each season, showing them how to preserve herbs to use later in many medicinal and nutritional products.”



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The Phytofarm summer workshops focus on plant identification, harvesting, drying, the medicinal actions of summer harvest plants, making medicinal oils for food and body and making medicinal salads using wild pasture plants and micro-greens high in vitamins and minerals.

The autumn workshops focus on ripening berries and seeds and making ointments, creams, balms, First Aid salves and liniments.

The winter workshops are about making wild plant vinegars, herbal syrups from berries, medicinal honeys, aromatic herbal foot baths, inhalations, throat sprays and gargles and invigorating and relaxing bath mixtures.

“In spring people will be able to find out all they’ve ever wanted to know about edible wild plants. I’ll be inspiring people to explore nutritional weeds and teaching them the five keys to a successful herb garden – and we’ll finish

off making herbal drinks for pleasure and health. There is also an indulgent deluxe medicine making workshop that includes a healing soak in a hot tub and herbal products to take home and enjoy.”

Valmai is constantly experimenting with new products. She unscrews the lid on a sweetly scented calendula hand cream as she talks about lemon balm lip gloss, rosewater body cream and chamomile cream with shea butter.

“Back in the 70s that’s how I funded my naturopathy studies – I made my own range of medicinal oils, soaps, shampoos, toothpaste and herbal teas. I’m keen to build a soap-making hut,” she says.

Then, as we sit down to a rich detox tea made from a strong infusion of cornsilk, liquorice, rosemary and oat straw, Valmai gazes off to the distant hills. It’s clear she can already see her personal vision completed. Visit [www.phytofarm.co.nz](http://www.phytofarm.co.nz)

staying healthy with herbs

Medicinal salads and soups can be made by using herbs that grow wild in the garden. Weeds are good sources of nutrients because of they naturally select uncultivated pasture or garden areas.

\* Chickweed grows wild in the garden, is generally available all year round, and is high in important minerals like iron, magnesium and zinc.

\* Garlic is a great tasty culinary addition to food, and is excellent for keeping the arteries healthy.

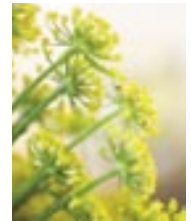
\* Nettles need to be picked with gloves, but when steamed, they can be used like spinach or made into a highly nutritious soup. They are high in iron, potassium, Vitamin A and C.

\* Mint provides a refreshing taste to salads and is one of the best carminative herbs available.

\* Dandelion leaves picked in spring when the leaves are less bitter provide a good liver tonic.

\* Nasturtium, calendula and chive flowers can all be added to salads to provide colour and Vitamin C.

\* Use liberal amounts of fresh micro-greens in your daily food selection. Micro-greens are bigger than sprouts, but smaller than baby salad greens and are high in vitamins and minerals.



Clockwise from top:

Valmai exploring a red ailder forest with Aimee, her exuberant border collie.

Insets: fennel; dried red clover flowers; dried rosehips with meadowsweet leaf; dried dandelion root.

Right: ginkgo leaves ripe for picking.

