

Natalie Greenwood and Michael Brouwer, owners of Southern Light Herbs, in front of a stand of mullein.

Herb heroes

JUSTINE McClymont meets two of Australia's pioneering medicinal herb growers and gets some tips for the herbal home garden.

Many gardeners are familiar with the fresh scent of peppermint or the gentle taste of chamomile – just two of many herbs that have long been used for medicinal purposes around the world.

Whether it's a warming cup of herbal tea or a bottle of herbal medicine from the naturopath, medicinal herbs have woven their way into our everyday lives.

According to the Australian Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, more than 50 per cent of Australians use complementary medicines, spending a massive \$2.2 billion a year. And while the medicinal herb industry in Australia has expanded in recent years, it's

estimated that less than 10 per cent of herbal materials used in Australia are locally produced.

Local growers

One of the few Australian growers is Southern Light Herbs, who have been paving the way for organic herb growers for the past 24 years. Owners Natalie Greenwood and Michael Brouwer grow 60 varieties of organic medicinal and culinary herbs on their Maldon herb farm.

The farm takes its name from the nearby historic township of Maldon in the heart of the Victorian goldfields, 135km northwest of Melbourne, and once served as a Cobb & Co horse paddock on the route between Bendigo and

Other structural perennial herbs such as rosemary and sage add form, grace and aroma, which lasts throughout the year.



The medicinal and stunning passionflower.



The herb gardens in early summer.

Ballarat. Today it is home to an abundance of herbs grown in the alluvial silty clay loam soils.

Herb growing has been a life-long passion for Greenwood and Brouwer who have embraced organic growing principles. Much of their success has been due to their adaptability and flexibility in trying new herb varieties and farming methods.

“The gardens and production area have expanded, contracted and developed over the years in direct reflection to the season and the water level in our dam come spring,” Greenwood says. “We utilise our farm to run trials on new potential crops to add to our herbal tea range, to run workshops for students of herbal medicine and those keen to pursue their own herb venture, and to provide certified organic propagation material to our growers.

“For this reason, our garden is varied not only in plant varieties but also growing techniques and styles. In the early years water seemed no limitation. We dug a four-megalitre dam that filled every winter and gave great pleasure every summer. We utilised mostly overhead irrigation and grew lush meadow herbs such as peppermint, spearmint and

meadowsweet in large blocks. Weeding proved a challenge but harvesting was a great pleasure.”

Then came 10 years of drought conditions in central Victoria and Greenwood and Brouwer needed to improvise and restructure the garden

if they wanted to survive.

“We installed dripper irrigation and introduced a greater percentage of hardy Mediterranean herbs such as lavender, liquorice, rosemary and sage, which changed the feel and appearance of the patch. The garden is always



Natalie Greenwood harvesting marshmallow.

PHOTOS: NATALIE GREENWOOD

Herbs for the home garden

While Greenwood and Brouwer grow 60 different herbs on their farm, it's not essential to have a large space to grow a nice selection of herbs. Plenty of medicinal herbs can be grown successfully in the home garden, keeping in mind a few key factors:

Herb selection It's important to choose herb varieties suited to your climate. Some herbs are suited to warmer climates while others will grow better in cool climates.

Compost Good quality compost is essential. A compost rich in manure will help improve the nutritional and medicinal quality of herbs.

Harvesting Herbs are harvested for their flowers, leaves, berries and roots. For home gardeners growing small quantities of herbs, it's usually easy enough to harvest by hand, although reaping hooks or scythes can help with larger quantities of leaves.

Drying Many herbs can be used fresh from the garden. However, if you'd like to dry your herbs it's recommended that they be dried over three to four days in a dry environment free from moisture and humidity.

Greenwood says most herbs will grow in a broad range of climates but will do best in their preferred climatic conditions. "Sometimes we can successfully alter our garden's growing setting by providing semi-shade from

summer sun, shelter from frosts or use raised beds to provide optimal drainage," she says.

Here are five medicinal herbs recommended by Greenwood that you might like to try at home.

Peppermint

Part of the Lamiaceae family, peppermint is commonly used to aid digestion and is a popular herbal tea. Greenwood says it is important to source the correct 'Black Mitcham' variety if you are growing for herbal tea.

"Peppermint expects a lot but gives the same, so provide plenty of good quality compost and regular water and it will produce abundantly from late spring through to autumn," she says. "After taking your harvest of healthy tips and leaves, make sure to cut the remaining stubble right back to just above the soil surface. This breaks any disease cycles and forces new vigorous shoots from underground."

- Best in temperate and warm-temperate climates.

Calendula

A member of the daisy family, calendula flowers range in colour from pale yellow to deep orange and are used for their healing properties.

"Calendula is really easy to direct sow in spring," Greenwood says. "But it is important to keep harvesting your flowers every few days to ensure they do not go to seed until late in the season. This will optimise the volume of flowers you will obtain from your plants. There is often a natural variance of size and colour of the flowers between plants, so mark the best plants in mid-season to enable you to collect their seeds for the following year."

- Copes with most climates, but prefers mild summers.

Lavender

Lavender originated from the Mediterranean and is known as a calming and relaxing herb. Greenwood says for herbal tea and culinary use, choose *Lavandula angustifolia*. "Our favourite variety is 'Egerton Blue', it's very low in camphor, has a stunning colour and a lovely delicate flower. Lavender loves full sun but does not cope with wet feet for extended periods, so a well-drained location is best."

- Lavender is adaptable to most climates other than tropical and subtropical regions where it is unlikely to flower well.

Marshmallow

Known as a soothing and healing herb, marshmallow is a perennial plant said to have been used by the ancient Greeks. "The roots, when grown in good friable soil, grow to about 60cm long, as thick as your thumb," Greenwood says. "Wash well then cut into 15cm lengths, spilt down the middle and dry in a warm sunny spot."

- Prefers a mild summer and regular watering to produce good quality leaves and roots.

Burdock

Burdock is traditionally used as a detoxifying herb and the roots are also eaten in Japan as a nutritious food. It can be an invasive plant, so be sure to keep it contained. It is a heavy feeder, requiring a good supply of water and nutrients and is best grown in an open friable soil for ease of root digging come winter.

"Don't underestimate the size of burdock's large leaves when planting out your patch or they may well overshadow their neighbours," Greenwood says. "We dig our burdock crop root in June every year. The cleaver burrs on the seed head will stick to everything – jumpers, cats, dogs and sheep included. So once the burdock has finished flowering and the bees have enjoyed the best of them, it's wise to remove the seed heads from the plant to avoid the seeds being spread to unwanted areas of your garden or farm."

- Burdock has been known to thrive in a wide range of climates.



Burdock flowers.



Lemon verbena in drying racks.

changing as we rotate crops and try out new ideas, but consistently remains a place of peace and enjoyment,” Greenwood says.

She says she has developed an appreciation of individual herbs on many levels over the years.

“It can be what a herb brings to the architecture and feel of the garden,” Greenwood says.

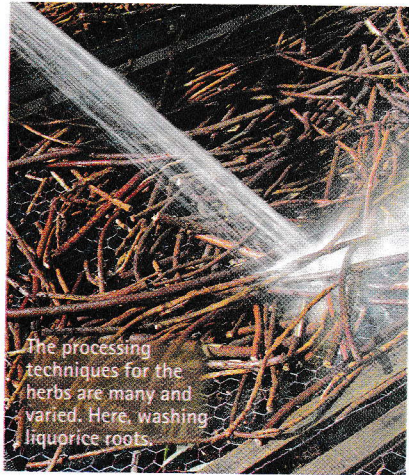
“Few surpass the speed of growth and towering presence of mullein in full bloom as birds gather its downy hairs to add a soft lining to their nests.

“Other structural perennial herbs such as rosemary and sage add form, grace and aroma, which lasts throughout the year. Some such as passionflower are simply stunning, with flowers so breathtaking it seems as if you are seeing and appreciating them for the very first time each season.

Parsley is more like a kindred spirit or friend. Many times when weeding or harvesting in the warmth of the summer, I find myself munching on some parsley which, instantly provides energy to complete the task.”



Sage tea is particularly soothing for sore throats.



The processing techniques for the herbs are many and varied. Here, washing licorice roots.

High quality Down Under

Along with Maldon farm, Southern Light Herbs also has a network of 30 certified organic growers spread from southern Tasmania to northern Queensland. And around 16 tonnes of dried culinary herbs, medicinal herbs, herbal infusions and black and green teas are produced each year. These are supplied to health food stores, wholefood stores, naturopaths and herbalists around the country.

Brouwer says Australian-grown organic medicinal herbs are of higher quality than imported herbs: “Imported herbs are very cheap and are grown in a lot of developing countries where labour costs are significantly less. Our customer base requires organic, so it’s a very important part of our product.”

He says that smaller Australian growers can produce herbs with better nutritional and medicinal value, as they are handling smaller quantities, which allows them to harvest and dry the herbs quickly and efficiently. “The real trick is in the harvesting and

getting the herbs onto your drying screen before they start to degrade.”

The geographical spread of the growers’ network also means that a greater range of herbs can be grown to suit the different climates.

“We usually set up a grower with 10 different herbs in their initial year,” Brouwer says. “We provide them with the correct varieties of plants. That’s a really important part of quality in that they’re actually growing medicinal-grade varieties.”

Greenwood and Brouwer are keen to encourage more organic medicinal herb growers in Australia and have embarked on a new adventure by establishing Greenhood Organic Farms. Located near Timboon, about three hours’ drive south of Maldon, they have selected this area for its mild climate, fertile soils and high rainfall.

The farm has been divided into eight certified organic blocks, each offering an opportunity for interested families to develop and manage their own herb farms within a creative, sharing community.

RESOURCES

- *Herbal Harvest* by Greg Whitten.
- *Herbs* by Lesley Bremness.
- *A Modern Herbal* by Mrs M Grieve – a definite oldie but goodie!
- W: southernlightherbs.com.au **OG**

CAUTION

Ensure that you seek advice from a qualified naturopath or herbalist before using any herbs for medicinal purposes.