



Lemon aid

TO SUPPORT HER DREAM OF AN ORGANIC LAVENDER FARM, MARY BIGGS TURNED TO THE PLENTIFUL LOCAL LEMONS.

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PHOTOGRAPHS: PAUL MCCREDIE

WHEN MARY BIGGS moved from Wellington to the Wairarapa in 1999 with her family she was struck by the number of lemon trees and the lemons languishing on the ground. "I thought it was such a waste. Someone should be doing something with those lemons," she recalls. Lemons, however, didn't feature in Mary's plans. Her dream was to grow lavender organically.

Mary quickly realised that she would need to hire help to tend the lavender. Not wanting her project to be a drain on the family's resources she sought an independent means of paying for that help. Lemons provided the solution.

Mary made lemon cordial. She bottled it in a collection of distinctive blue bottles she had thought too lovely to throw out and gave it away to friends and family. When the cordial received a really positive response she thought "Maybe I could do something with this". To proceed she needed more bottles and the minimum order of 1000 galvanised her into action. "I had to use them," she explains.



A major breakthrough came after six months when a serendipitous visit to Kirkcaldie and Stains in Wellington resulted in an order for 500 bottles of cordial. "I realised I had to get serious about it and find a commercial kitchen," she remembers. Everything started coming together when the RSA in Featherston allowed Mary to use its commercial kitchen.

As the mother of four children, then ranging in age from seven to 15, Mary wanted to be home-based. Her next goal was to install a commercial kitchen at home but she wanted the kitchen to pay for itself. Although she now makes cordial by the pallet load, some 1300 bottles, she only does so every four to six weeks.

To ensure that the kitchen was continuously productive, she made other lemon products – curd, mustard, biscotti and preserved lemons.

From the outset the lemons for all these products have been sourced from Wairarapa backyards. "I have a series of favourite lemon trees in Featherston and Martinborough that I pick from," Mary says. "I pick in exchange for lemon cordial."

"People are very supportive – there's a sense of Featherston owning the product." While she does not grow these lemons herself Mary always asks about their care. "Some trees are fantastic and I'm keen to find out why." For the most part Mary uses the 'Meyer' variety. "I prefer 'Meyer' because they have thin skins, are easy to juice, very juicy and have a golden colour," she explains.

When a severe frost in the winter of 2001 significantly depleted her supply of lemons and affected their quality Mary realised that she would have to secure a source of lemons herself. In the hope that they would survive and she would eventually be self-sufficient she decided to plant 100 'Meyer' trees. "I was determined to look after them properly. I planted the lemons in the home paddock, close to the house where the clothes line is, so I do weed

and irrigate, and they are doing really well," she declares with satisfaction.

Having initially been a means to an end, lemons have become an end in themselves. Not that Mary's original dreams of lavender have been abandoned. A field of lavender awaits her time and attention. Inspired by the success of her lemon cordial she hopes to make a lavender version. Meanwhile Mary enjoys working with lemons – "They are such a cheerful looking fruit, with their shape and gorgeous colour. Really uplifting."

TIPS

■ In Mary's observation the key to thriving lemons is good shelter from the wind. They need sun, although not necessarily all day sun. Morning sun is better.

■ Mary irrigates her lemon trees because she wants them to be especially juicy. She mulches them to prevent the Wairarapa winds from drying the soil.

■ Lemons are heavy feeders and Mary feeds them with sheep and chicken manure from her property, and worm oil.

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Lavender's Green lemon cordial is
available nationwide.