
A detailed photograph showing a variety of beans and pea pods. Several open brown paper bags are scattered around, each containing a different type of bean: some are small and multi-colored, others are large and white, and some are dark. In the foreground, a woven basket is overflowing with fresh pea pods in various colors including green, purple, and speckled. The overall composition is a rich, textured display of legumes.

People & plants

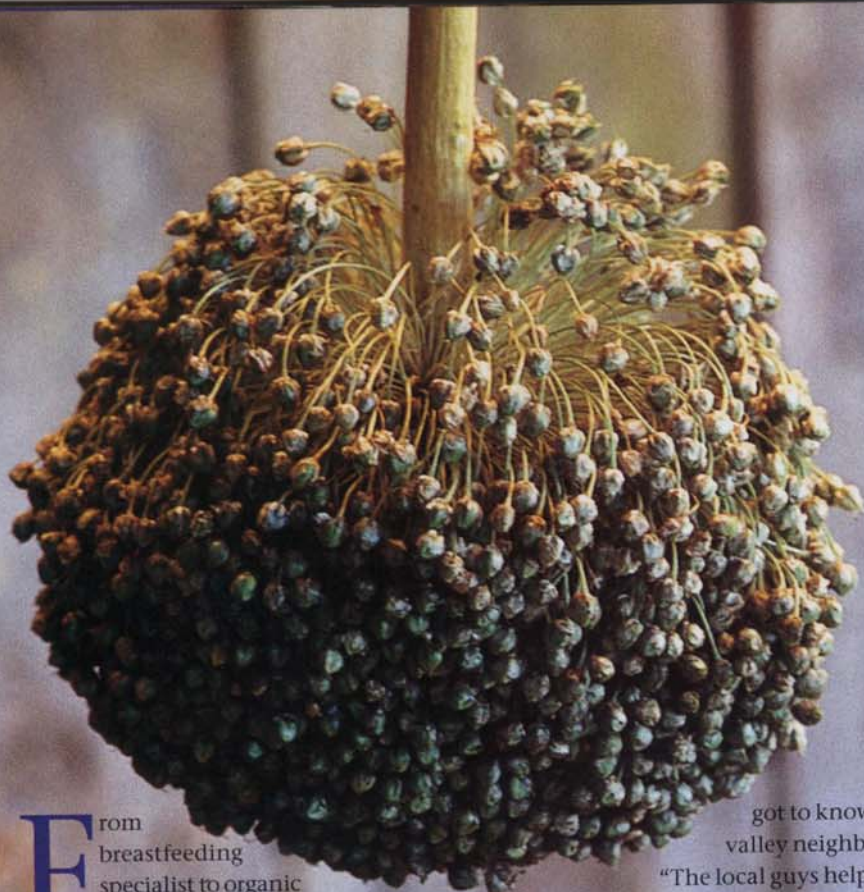
melting pot



Mandi, Sam and David Porta. Sam is holding the family's pet French rooster (and German shepherd Frodo Barkins couldn't resist the camera either.) Opposite: Shelled beans are essential ingredients in Mexican cooking.

Julian Matthews meets a Mexican IT consultant, an American nurse, a Nepalese sherpa and a wily German shepherd with an insatiable appetite for organic blueberries at a permaculture paradise in Upper Hutt

PHOTOS: JULIAN MATTHEWS



The ball-shaped flower heads of leeks hang to dry in the shed beside the vegetable garden. The seeds are later collected and stored in bags, ready for resowing.

From breastfeeding specialist to organic blueberry farmer: as far as career moves go, Mandi Porta jokes that hers involved "a learning curve as steep as Mount Everest". So who better to offer her a steady hand than Nima Sherpa, a Nepalese mountaineering guide who was friends with Sir Edmund Hillary?

Mandi, an American nurse, and her husband David, a Mexican IT consultant, chanced upon a blueberry farm for sale in the Akatarawa Valley near Upper Hutt four years ago. Keen to put their organic principles into practice, they snapped it

got to know her valley neighbours.

"The local guys helped a lot when I ran into difficulties with my machinery," she says.

Twelve months later, Nima arrived on the scene. He had previously worked at the blueberry farm, on his first trip to New Zealand, before heading home to his village to marry wife LakPhutti.

Mandi admits that Nima's return was "a godsend" but says she's glad that she had already learned to cope on her own.

Some lessons were learned the hard way. When overseas visitors adamantly advised her to remove all the weeds

The vegetable patch was once infested with convolvulus and, because of the garden's no spray organic regime, Nima had no option but to dig out every piece of root.

up, despite the fact that neither had much experience working on the land.

While David continued to commute to Wellington, where his computer skills were in demand, Mandi taught herself how to drive a tractor, manoeuvre a large mower and wield a pair of pruning shears to snip her way around the farm's 2000 berry bushes. She also read everything she could, not just about growing the finest blueberries, but about organic gardening, permaculture techniques and caring for the environment. Mandi also joined Organic Farming NZ and

around her blueberry bushes, Mandi diligently tackled the task. But part-way through the job, a rainstorm caused the adjacent river to breach its banks and flood the blueberry farm. All the bushes Mandi had weeded around with such care were washed away, while those still enveloped by weeds remained anchored in the ground.

These days Mandi doesn't pull out the weeds around her plants. Instead, she cuts them down twice a year and lays the piles of cut foliage around the blueberry bushes as a moisture-retaining mulch.

Blueberries aren't the only crop that now thrives at The Blueberry Farm and Bakehouse. In the extensive vegetable patch there are organic tomatoes and tomatillos and beans galore, all destined for the authentic Mexican cafe that David's mother Rosita runs at the farm each weekend from December until early May.

The vegetable garden was once just a patch of convolvulus-infested clay. Because of the garden's no-spray organic regime, Nima had no option but to dig out every single root of the convolvulus by hand before he could set about improving the soil by digging in copious amounts of compost to create a new layer of rich, well-drained loam on top of the clay.

Now, whenever a new vegetable crop is planted, Nima adds a layer of compost as a mulch around the plants. Throughout the growing season, more compost is added every few weeks. "This makes the soil rich and the worm population soon builds up," says Nima.


So what makes top-notch compost? "It's much the same as back home in Nepal," says Nima. "I use lots of grass and leaves, except here I have a mulcher for turning branches that fall off the trees into compost."

Nima's compost heaps are situated in the open so they get plenty of air, sun and rain. The heaps are also forked over (turned to hasten decomposition) once a month for the best results, although some heaps are left for two or three months between turnings.

"Chook tractors" are another great help with soil fertility. These portable, lightweight hen houses are moved into the vegetable garden after a crop has just been harvested. The chooks cultivate the bare ground as they scratch about for pests, all the while fertilising the soil.


Mandi and Nima made the "chook tractors" using a design adapted from a permaculture model, then LakPhutti wove the nesting boxes from bamboo.

Most of the vegetables Nima grows at The Blueberry Farm also grow well in his Nepalese village, although tomatoes are

A color photograph of a family of three sitting outdoors. On the left is a man (Nima) wearing a traditional orange and white patterned shawl over a white shirt. In the center is a young boy (Brucesonam) wearing an orange sleeveless shirt and blue pants. On the right is a woman (LakPhutti) wearing a blue patterned vest over a light blue shirt. They are all smiling at the camera.

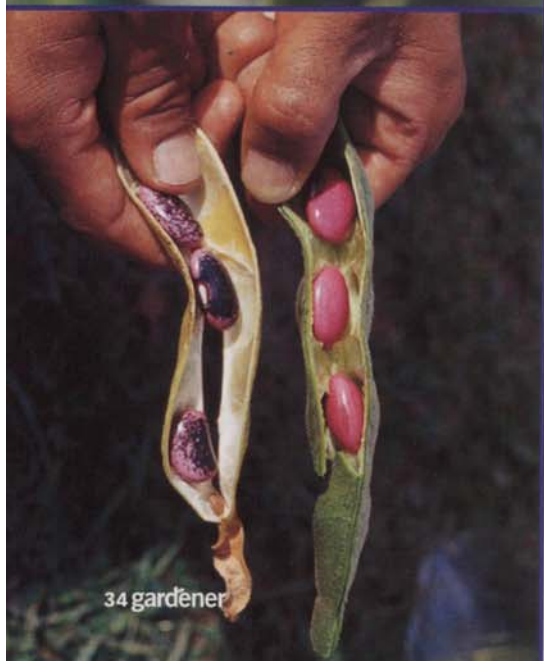
Nima, Brucesonam and
LakPhutti Sherpa.

Since leaving the mountains of Nepal for a new life in New Zealand, Nima, his wife LakPhutti and their son Brucesonam have adapted to a classic Kiwi lifestyle – they've even become keen Hurricanes rugby supporters.

A close-up photograph showing a pair of hands holding a single green tomatillo. The tomatillo is round and green, with its papery husk partially split open. The background is blurred, showing more of the plant and leaves.

Tasty tomatillos

- **Green tomatillos** (pronounced toe-mah-tee-yoh) look like giant Cape gooseberries. They're rich in vitamin C and are used to make Salsa Verde.
- **Tomatillos grow well** with tomatoes and appreciate plenty of warmth, rich soil and lots of sun.
- **Sow seed in spring.** Start in pots in a sheltered spot or, if sowing in the ground, wait at least three weeks after the last frosts.
- **Harvest when the husks split.** The fruit should be golf ball-sized and green. If turning yellow, it's overripe.
- **Tomatillo 'Grande Verde' seed** is available from Kings Seeds, PO Box 283, Katikati, ph (07) 549 3409.



a notable exception. Nepalese summers simply aren't long enough for the fruit to ripen fully. Potatoes are the main crop in Nima's village – as well as being a staple part of their diet, potatoes are a valuable commodity to barter with rice growers in lower, warmer regions.

Nima grew up with an awareness that saving good quality seed for the next season's crop is vital to one's survival. In Nepal, Nima would store his seed in mouse-proof wooden boxes, but here he stores it in the shed next to the vegetable garden. It's a wonderfully rustic scene, as the light streaming through the little windows illuminates paper bags full of

Above: Beehives nestle into a paddock. Left, from top: Organic garlic is tied into big bunches to dry in the garden shed; The papery husk of a tomatillo; Nima shells beans for the Mexican restaurant.

wheeled out after the food was prepared and cooked indoors. Rosita's skills are so legendary that, when the restaurant opens at midday on weekends, folk from the Mexican Embassy are often waiting at the head of the queue.

The restaurant's rural atmosphere can be a culture shock for some city visitors, as they sit down on a hay bale seat with little blue-black Cayuga ducks at their

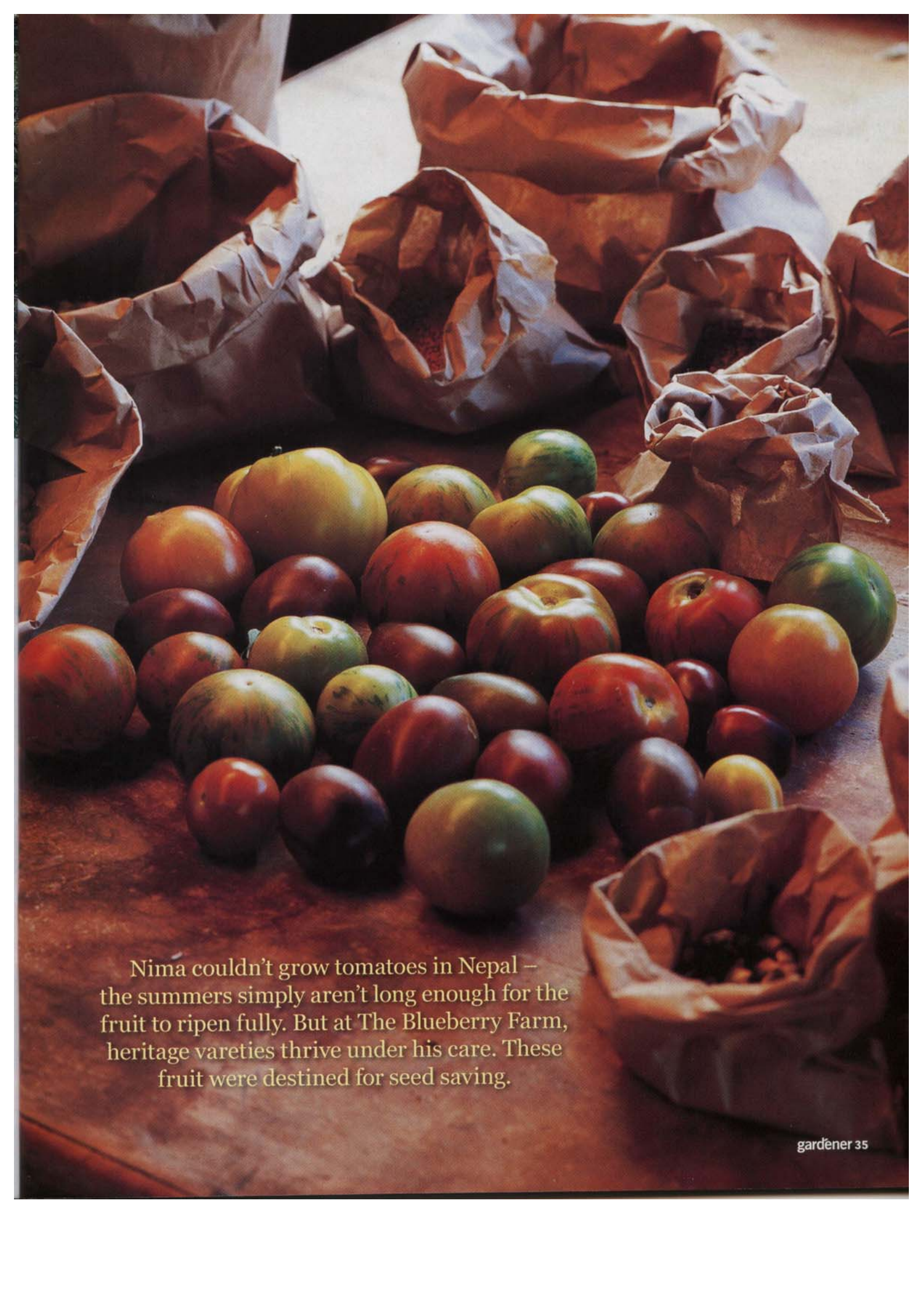
In Nepal, Nima grew up with an awareness that saving good quality seed for the next season's crop is vital to one's survival.

seeds. There are 40 different varieties, amazingly varied in colour, shape and size, while bunches of organic garlic and ball-shaped leek flowers hang from the ceiling and walls.

Smells, rather than seeds, drew my attention to the other rustic dwelling in the garden. The Mexican restaurant at The Blueberry Farm is humble and unpretentious, but the food Rosita cooks is delicious and authentic. Before she came to New Zealand, Rosita used to cook in Mexico, selling her food from a traditional street barrow that was

feet and an aristocratic French Faverolle rooster eyeing them from a fence post. And few guests escape the attention of Frodo Barkins, the friendliest German shepherd you'll ever meet, who acts as the one dog welcoming committee (except when he's off having a feed of blueberries, nibbling them off the bushes in a canine version of pick your own.) It's hardly surprising that everyone who comes here is instantly enchanted.

That includes Nima and LakPhutti. Neither had even seen a car before they came to New Zealand, so you might



Nima couldn't grow tomatoes in Nepal — the summers simply aren't long enough for the fruit to ripen fully. But at The Blueberry Farm, heritage varieties thrive under his care. These fruit were destined for seed saving.

LIFE'S SIMPLE PLEASURES

Rewarding Blueberries



- From the Lily-of-the-Valley flowers to the plump juicy fruit to the attractive autumn foliage.
- Ideal in containers, as an attractive hedge or striking specimen.
- Full of anti-oxidants.
- A healthy snack for young and old.
- Kid's lollies! – but nature's way!
- Try in muffins, smoothies, jams. My favourite – Fresh is best.
- Freeze for later if any are left after the kid's feed.




**incredible
edibles®**

...bringing your garden
alive with fruit

www.edible.co.nz



Above: Runner beans and corn are good friends in the vegetable patch, which is strictly organic.

Left: Ripening blueberries.



Growing blueberries

- **Blueberries need** a sunny situation and acidic soil to grow well. Digging in peat and adding sulphur to the soil helps to increase acidity, as does mulching with pine needles. Never add lime to the soil when growing blueberries.
- **Good drainage is** another essential, as is steady rainfall or irrigation, especially for newly established bushes.
- **Mandi makes liquid fertiliser** from comfrey leaves. She picks enough leaves to half fill a container, then tops it up with water. She leaves it for four weeks so the comfrey decomposes. (You might want to place the container well away from your house as it smells pretty bad.) When it's ready to use, she dilutes it 5:1 with fresh water and pours it around her plants every few weeks.
- **Mulching established** blueberry bushes with old, untreated sawdust, shredded comfrey leaves or piles of organic compost is also beneficial.

wonder if they've had trouble adapting. If so, they show no signs. LakPhutti has mastered the use of an espresso machine while Nima happily answers calls on his cell phone and plans weekend games of golf, a sport he'd never heard of until he was watching television one evening in Upper Hutt. "I wondered what on earth was happening – people chasing a little ball around then hitting it with a funny stick," he says.

Now he loves the game, and rugby too, having become a devoted Hurricanes fan. When he returned home recently he climbed a high mountain near his village and placed a Hurricanes flag on the summit. 🏴‍☠️

Visiting The Blueberry Farm

The Blueberry Farm, 1229 Akatarawa Rd, Upper Hutt, is open from mid-December until late April to pick your own berries. For more details, visit www.blueberryfarm.co.nz or ph (04) 526 6788.

Himalayan wildflower tours

Nima takes trekking tours to the Himalayas in the Northern Hemisphere spring when blue meconopsis poppies, magnolias and rhododendrons are in flower. The treks are around three weeks and include a stay at Nima's village. For details, ph (04) 526 6997 or email nimaosherpa@hotmail.com.



There are 15 types of blueberry bushes planted at The Blueberry Farm – each with a subtly different flavour – so there are always plenty of berries to pick during the four and a half month season.



Frodo Barkins greets guests and helps himself to more than a few berries.
Above: Mandi and Nima harvest baskets of blueberries in summer.