

Not Going to Pot

Make no mistake. Today's hemp has nothing to do with reefer madness.

There was a lot of chuckling and snickering when the Canadian government dropped its sanction against growing hemp in 1998. But the jokes have no punch line. Indeed, hemp farmers are having the last laugh. There is a versatile fibre and seed crop that can be manufactured into clothing, cosmetics and construction materials. And let's be clear: it has nothing to do with tuning in, turning on, or Cheech and Chong.

Although it may seem a recent fad, there's nothing new about hemp. In fact, it has been a staple crop in many countries for thousands of years. Even in Canada, early settlers were encouraged to grow the plant for its strong, durable stalk fibres, ideal for making rope, twine and textiles. A hundred years ago, there were hemp farms in nearly every province. But their days were numbered, thanks to the Opium and Narcotics

Control Act of 1938, which prohibited growing hemp in Canada. Hot on the heels of the temperance movement, the act outlawed the production and sale of addictive substances.

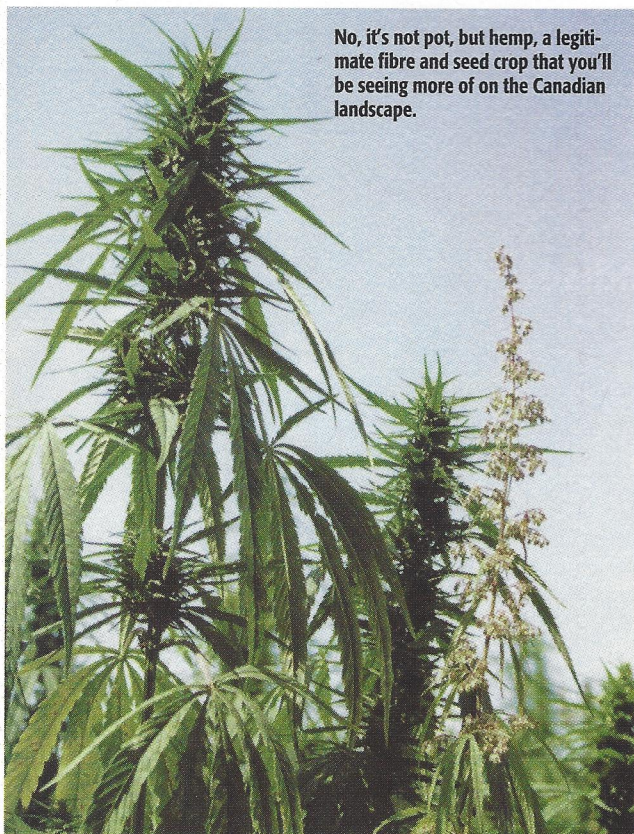
As it turned out, the dogooders were over-reacting, since it is virtually impossible to get high on agriculturally grown hemp. Though it belongs to the same species as marijuana (*Cannabis sativa*), the active ingredient (tongue-twistingly named delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC) has virtually been bred out of commercial hemp. You'd have to smoke a whole field to get a buzz. Indeed, no THC can be found in the stalks or seeds, which are the only parts of the plant harvested for industrial use.

It took 60 years, but the government has overcome its paranoia. A pressing demand for new fibre crops, along with a need to give agriculture a much-needed shot in the arm, finally prompted Health Canada to license a few strictly controlled hemp crops in 1994. The move was purely experimental, but the results were so encouraging that the ban was lifted four years later.

Hemp is once again legal, but that doesn't mean it's all smooth sailing. If you want to grow hemp, you must apply to Health Canada for an annual license, as well as comply with a set of laws that includes keeping thorough records of production and distribution. You must also report the precise location of your hemp fields and the type of seeds sown: only approved industrial varieties, which have a THC level less than 0.3 percent, can be planted. In addition, hemp farmers are subject to surprise inspections, which can include testing plants for THC.

For anyone willing to endure the red tape, however, hemp farming can be a rewarding endeavour. Hemp is a high-yield plant that grows rapidly and easily in our temperate climate and thrives when sown in high densities—up to an astonishing 150 plants per square metre. In fact, when grown thickly enough, tall hemp plants choke out invasive weeds and do away with the need for herbicides. And although not immune to insects or disease, hemp can also be successfully grown without pesticides, which makes it very appealing to the environmentally conscious. "We grow our crop totally without insecticides," says Bob L'Ecuyer of Kenex Ltd., Canada's largest hemp producer near Chatham, Ontario. "This helps make hemp more cost-effective than other crops. It's also a

No, it's not pot, but hemp, a legitimate fibre and seed crop that you'll be seeing more of on the Canadian landscape.



NATURAL HEMP/PHASIS

good rotational crop because the plants have deep tap roots that aerate the ground. And rotating hemp gives you a chance to rid the soil of any chemical build-up from other crops.”

Many tobacco farmers have turned to hemp in recent years and some western grain farmers are also trying hemp in the search for something more profitable than wheat. Just like a century ago, hemp farms can once again be found from coast to coast, although most are located in southern Ontario and Manitoba.

What makes hemp so special? It's the sheer versatility of the plant, combined with its “natural” appeal to those in search of environmentally friendly products. “The hemp plant yields three basic products—a strong fibre from the core of the stalk, hemp chips, and grain,” explains Louise Hollingsworth, executive director of the Ontario Hemp Alliance. “These basic elements have thousands of uses. The fibres can be made into everything from mats and ropes to panelling and plywood, while hemp chips are ideal for stable bedding and landscaping.” The long, tough fibres also yield yarns and textiles that are stronger than cotton and make durable, attractive clothing. Moreover, hemp fibres can be used for making paper; in fact, an acre of hemp produces four times as much pulp as an acre of timber, good news in a world where



GORDON SCHEIFELE (2)

Large round bales of retted hemp stalks.

Lakehead University's Gordon Scheifele (left) inspects hemp plants grown for fibre with hemp breeder Peter Dragla, in Ontario.



concerns over rapidly dwindling forest resources are becoming increasingly insistent.

It isn't just hemp fibre that's attracting attention. The oil pressed from the grain is highly nutritious, and hemp-based foods such as cooking oil, salad dressings and even ice cream have become a hot com-

modity among health-conscious consumers. “Hemp has a hand up in the food market because of its nutritional profile and its ability to be grown organically,” says Hollingsworth. “The grain offers a rare combination of essential fatty acids and high-quality protein. The oil is also used for cosmetics, while industrial ap-

plications include lubricants, paints, glues and plastics.”

Given its many attributes, hemp sounds almost too good to be true. The bubble may burst someday, especially as competition heats up. Many European countries have been growing hemp since the early '90s and are on the lookout for foreign markets. And although cultivation is still illegal in the United States, it's probably only a matter of time before the laws change and the American market, which now accounts for a significant percentage of Canadian hemp exports, will dry up.

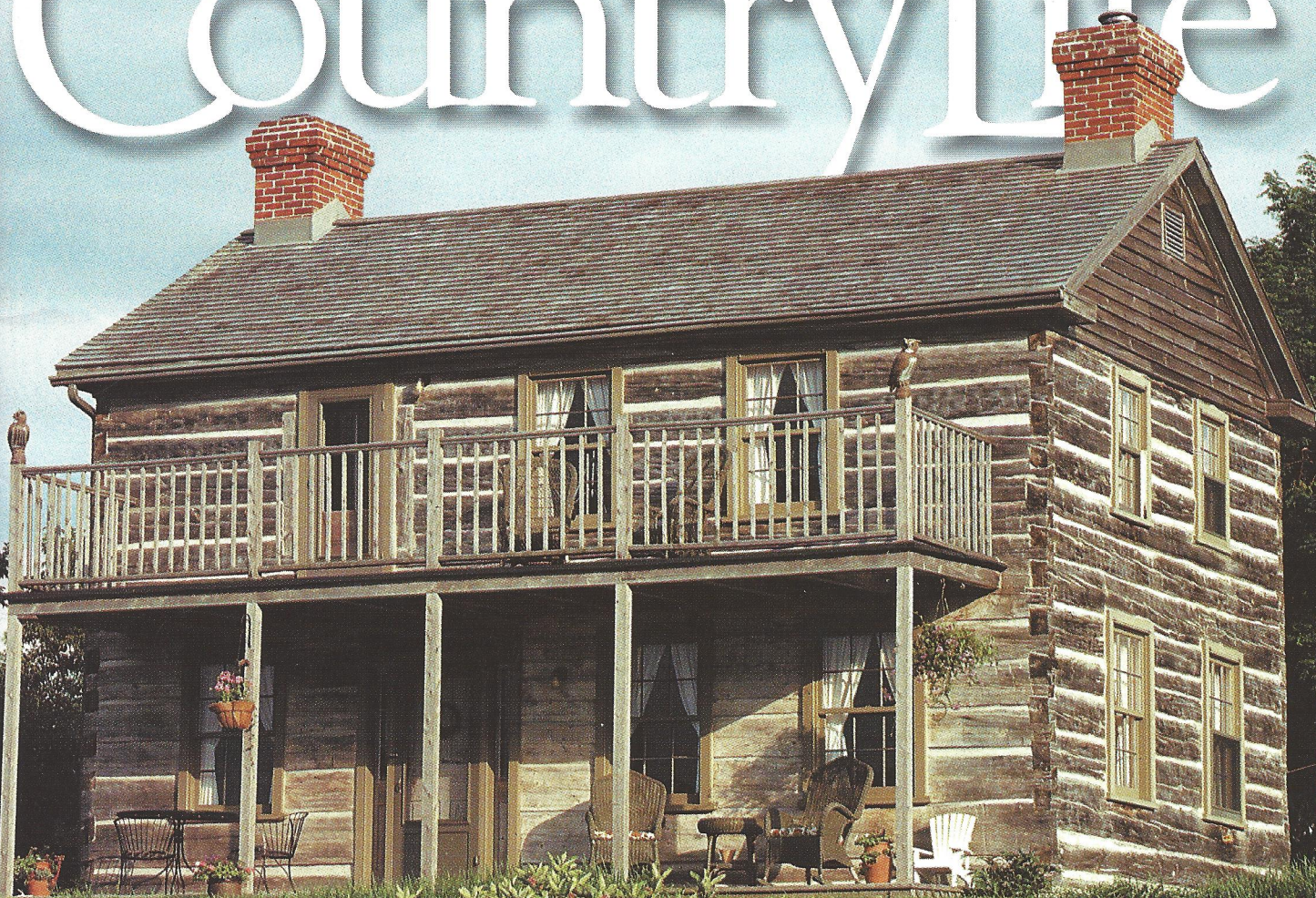
“He who laughs last, laughs best,” as the saying goes, and that certainly seems true of Canada's burgeoning hemp industry. Only time will tell, but for now, hemp appears to be here to stay.

—Ann Brightman

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