

Hemp takes root

South Africa's first 'cannabis' home, in Noordhoek, could spark a revolution in the building trade, writes MELANIE PETERS

AMID the fynbos on one of Noordhoek's scenic slopes, one of Mother Nature's more controversial plants has germinated – in the shape of a house. The country's first cannabis, or hemp house, is under construction and is being advocated as an eco-friendly and sustainable alternative to brick and mortar.



PICTURES: MXOLISI MADELA **GREEN FOOTPRINT: Tony Budden has used hemp-based building materials to create an environmentally friendly house in Noordhoek.**

Building began in October and is due to finish next month. Most of the raw building materials were made from hemp imported from overseas. It has been turned into hempcrete, hemp insulation, hemp particle boards, hemp floors, hemp carpets, hemp furnishings, hemp textiles and hemp oil.

The project, entitled the "House that Hemp Built", is the brainchild of entrepreneurs Tony Budden and his partner Duncan Parker. Similar houses have been built in Ireland, the UK and France.

Standing on the building site, Budden, a hemp activist, is at pains to point out the difference between industrial hemp and its cousin dagga, or marijuana.

“The major difference is that hemp only contains minute traces of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, and doesn’t make you high. It has hundreds of benefits and can be used in a variety of ways from body care, nutritional supplements and foods or oils to making fabrics, rope, bed linens, even skateboards and surfboards.”

Most of these goods can be found in the duo’s shops, Hemporium in Long Street and Constantia. Budden has made it his mission to create awareness and educate people about the plant, and has even lobbied the government on its merits. He points out: “There is a big difference between mushrooms served at breakfast and the hallucinogenic effects of magic mushrooms.

“The use of hemp goes back thousands of years. There is still a 300-year-old building made from hemp in Japan. Old sailing ships’ sails were made from hemp.

“It was only in the last century that hemp was made illegal. The US attitude towards hemp has influenced many others to adopt similar legislation. Part of America’s criteria for foreign aid is the dismantling of the receiving country’s drug industry.

“Because hemp and marijuana are seen as the same by the US government, a hemp industry would deny any country access to valuable foreign aid.

“Recently many countries have recognised hemp’s potential and its value as an environmentally responsible crop. More than 30 nations, including England, France, Germany, China and Canada now have a legal hemp industry, and many more are undertaking research in a move towards a change in legislation.”

Budden has presented usable hemp products to international organisations, hemp expos, conferences, universities, and was also recently invited to present a paper at the International Hemp Building Symposium in Ireland.

“Obviously our ultimate goal is to grow and produce hemp construction materials in South Africa, but we are not there yet. Currently, industrial hemp as a sustainable crop in South Africa is at a research level.”

He said while costs were still high because the raw matter was imported, in the long run these would decrease once hemp was available here.

The cost of the house per square metre was R10 000 and benefits would be reaped in the long run as the house was energy efficient. A limited amount of concrete and brickwork was used for the foundation to ensure that the house stood on a solid base, he said.

Then wooden frames were put up to form the skeleton of the structure and hemp materials used to build floors, wall and ceiling.

He said rubble from cement and bricks during the usual building process created a huge solid waste problem that ended on land fill sites.

The hemp and lime mixture used during construction was biodegradable.

Although Budden will live in the house, it will also be a showcase for the uses of the hemp plant as building materials and finishes, and will be open to view once a week. "You don't have to live in a tepee in an eco-village to shrink your carbon footprint. You don't have to change your life style, just your resources."

He believed that the cultivation of hemp in South Africa could uplift rural communities and create hundreds of jobs, especially in the Eastern Cape, which was ideal for growing this kind of crop.

For example, instead of using wood from trees that take 10 years to grow, hemp takes just four months to produce a usable crop. This can be used to make chipboard. "A chipboard factory alone will provide in excess of 300 jobs and need 6 000ha of hemp to keep it busy, saving countless trees in the process."

The move to hemp usage in South Africa was very slow, said Budden.

Countries like Australia, which started its research at the same time as South Africa, had already jumped on the bandwagon of a world reawakening to the benefits of hemp.

He said natural resources like hemp were easy to grow, used organic fertiliser and did not need agricultural chemicals to grow. "South Africa cannot afford to not take advantage of this opportunity if it is serious about a greener future and sustainable resources".

On his website Budden points out that the Encyclopedia Britannica of 1856 stated: "It is not as a narcotic and excitant that the hemp plant is most useful to mankind; it is as an advancer rather than a retarder of civilisation, that its utility is made most manifest."



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