

A NEW LEAF

Cannabis – that’s the stuff you smoke, right?
Not necessarily. Hemp is a species of cannabis yet
some say it’s the crop that could save the world



□ Tony Budden standing in a field of half-grown hemp.

A NEW CROP PLANTED NEAR A LITTLE Transkei village, stood ringed by a tall fence. The local teenage boys immediately recognised it, but they’d never seen the plant grown like this before – in the open, planted by people from the city, yet behind barbed wire.

One night their curiosity overcame them. They broke through the fence, stole a few armfuls, dried it and smoked it. A few weeks later they went to the chief of the area.

The *mlungus* were wasting their time with that stuff, they said, disgusted. They’d smoked it and smoked it and, despite their best efforts, were still alarmingly clear-headed. The crop was worthless.

Tony Budden, head of a retail chain named Hemporium, grins wryly as he tells the story. He hates the fences – they make the hemp look like a desirable forbidden substance, though nothing could be further from the truth. You could smoke a whole hectare without getting that infamous marijuana ‘buzz’. Nevertheless a raft of laws stipulates that hemp is cannabis and therefore must be controlled.

Hemp is dagga’s non-psychoactive cousin and it has a long, noble history. The first Bible was printed on paper made with hemp fibre, as was the American Declaration of Independence. Hemp fibre, turned into sails, enabled explorers to sail the seven seas. Most of the world’s best-known paintings are on hemp canvas. Levi Strauss’s first jeans were made from hemp. Archaeologists have found hemp clothing, still in fair condition, dating back to 500 BC. The word ‘canvas’ comes from cannabis. And have you ever wondered why the Afrikaans word for shirt is *hemp*?

There are records showing hemp to have been cultivated for 10 000 years, making it one of the first plants to be grown by humans. And until the end of the last century, hemp remained one of the world’s most important agricultural crops.

Hardy and easy to grow, it is astoundingly versatile. The fibre is used for paper, fabric, building materials (fibregrass, anyone?) and rope. The seeds are full of essential omega fatty acids and high in a particularly easy-to-digest protein, making them perfect for health products and those with compromised immune systems. The oil can also be turned into biodiesel or biodegradable plastics and is used in paints, varnishes, soaps and lamp oil.

Hemp is a rapid absorber of carbon dioxide, can be used for animal feed and bedding, needs virtually no fertiliser and certainly no pesticides. It grows >>



□ At the moment all the trial crops of hemp in the Eastern and Western Cape have to be fenced off because the plants are still classified as narcotics – even though a bagful wouldn’t give you the tiniest high.

□ Hemp grows four metres high in 100 days in South Africa, rapidly delivering four times more fibre than a tree plantation on the same acreage.

□ Hemp is harvested mostly for its fibrous stems and its nutritious seeds.

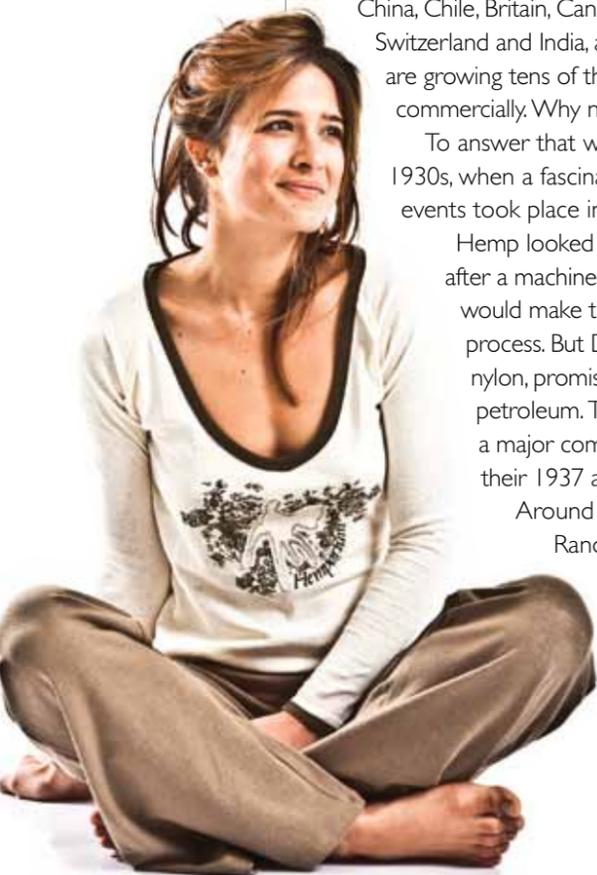


□ Tony Budden's new eco-home boasts carpeting, curtains and kitchen cabinets made from hemp. Even the pinewood is varnished with hemp oil.

□ Hemp makes excellent insulation and chipboard.



□ Hemporium and the House of Hemp market durable, fashionable hemp clothing.



>> fast, stifles weeds and is drought resistant. It's perfect for community or commercial farming because of the low input costs.

As a fibre crop it has no peer. Ten hectares of hemp provide more useful fibre than 40 hectares of forest, and do so in five months instead of 10 to 20 years. Because of all these uses, hemp holds massive potential as a job creator.

So why aren't we growing this paragon of a crop? China, Chile, Britain, Canada, Romania, Hungary, Switzerland and India, among nearly 20 more, are growing tens of thousands of hectares of it commercially. Why not South Africa?

To answer that we have to go back to the 1930s, when a fascinating convergence of events took place in the United States.

Hemp looked set for a resurgence after a machine was patented that would make the crop easier to process. But DuPont had just invented nylon, promising cheap fibre from petroleum. They saw hemp as a major competitor (and said so in their 1937 annual report).

Around the same time, William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper magnate, had invested heavily in pulpwood forests. If hemp were to remain legal and

processing it became easier, he would lose millions. Hemp also needed fewer chemicals to turn it into paper, making it by far the better option.

So Hearst began a campaign through his newspapers to demonise hemp. He cast it as a narcotic that would send lust-crazed Mexicans surging over the border to rape American women. His newspapers also suggested 'marihuana', as they called it, would give minority groups ideas above their station.

Hearst produced a film, *Reefer Madness*, that portrayed cannabis as a frightening substance ethnic groups would sell to schoolchildren, causing them to drop out and become violent criminals.

In 1937 all cannabis in the US was criminalised – and so began a massive move towards petrochemical products and away from farming and natural fibre.

South Africa, like most Western countries, followed America's suit. But China and a few Communist bloc countries carried on cultivating hemp and today China is the world's greatest exporter (most of the crop going, ironically, to the US). We have never revoked our laws governing cannabis, either the sativa subspecies (hemp) or indica (dagga).

But things are changing. You might have heard about Tony Budden's new eco-home in Cape Town's Noordhoek. The walls are made of hempcrete (hemp blended with lime). The carpets are made from hemp, as are the curtains, the sofa fabric and the bedding. The walls are finished off in hemp screed and the whole house is insulated with hemp.

Even the kitchen cupboards are made out of hemp chipboard and the wood products have

been treated with hemp oil.

So well insulated is the house (it also has double glazed windows) that Tony boasts he pays only R300 for his electricity every month. "It's a living, breathing, organic house." His only regret is that most of the hemp used came from China and other countries.

Growing hemp can create jobs and provide housing, food, fuel and fibre, he says. "And it doesn't cost the earth. It's perfect as a cash crop."

This February, trial crops (all grown behind fences) will be harvested in the Eastern Cape as well as near Wellington in the Western Cape. The project, overseen by the Agricultural Research Council, is trying out four or five cultivars that seem suitable for South African conditions.

According to Tony, the Eastern Cape has been identified as the province with the most potential as it has good summer rainfall, plenty of unused marginal land and a population in desperate need of a flourishing rural economy.

As a bonus, hemp can be grown in rotation with another fibre crop, flax (which also has a seed with healthy fatty acids).

With the potential benefits of hemp becoming better known, so political will is growing to change the many laws governing *Cannabis sativa* cultivation.

But what happens if someone sneaks a few dagga plants into a field of hemp?

Tony points out that it would be pointless as the hemp would pollinate the dagga and make it lose its potency and value. And, if caught, the farmer would lose his permit to grow a very profitable crop.

"The authorities are also nervous that if people were found with dagga in, say, their car they might claim it was hemp and a lot of expensive tests would have to be carried out. But anyone transporting hemp would only have a bale of sticks to show for it – the leaves are left behind as mulch – and they would also have to have a permit with them."

For now, though, hemp remains classified as a narcotic under at least four different laws and so has to remain behind a fence. The hope is that perhaps the lure of creating jobs and uplifting rural communities will soon overcome the barbed wire and red tape. □

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FOOTNOTES

- Henry Ford created a car made mostly out of hemp fibre that was 10 times stronger than steel and three times lighter. The car's fuel was also made from hemp oil, as were its lubricating products. Ford boasted that the car fulfilled his dream of making 'a car from the soil'.
- Rudolph Diesel designed his engine to run on fuel from hemp.
- Hemp's ability to purify contaminated areas and water is well known. It is being used in Chernobyl for exactly that reason.
- In South Africa, hemp grows up to four metres high in under 100 days.
- Racing pigeon fanciers and breeders clamour for hemp seed, saying it makes the birds live 40% longer and fly faster.
- Hemp oil is highly effective as an additive in fish bait.
- Hemp fibre is three times stronger than cotton.
- Hemp is cultivated alongside food crops in China, its dense growth inhibiting weeds.

□ Supported by a steel framework, Tony's eco-home has hempcrete (hemp and lime) walls that are also well insulated with hemp.

