



Plant warfare

Police are shutting down cannabis farms on a daily basis in a bid to disrupt a budding market in domestic weed. **Max Daly** investigates the changing nature of cannabis supply in Britain

PETER Hart noticed the tunnel as he was taking a stroll alongside a thick wall of blackberry bushes on the outskirts of his farm near Penzance, Cornwall. "The tunnel was driven through the bushes and I couldn't work out what might have made it," says Hart. Scrambling in on his hands and knees, it led him to a levelled bit of land dotted with 50 tropical-looking plants covered in plastic. He didn't know what they were, but he was sure they were nothing to do with his usual crop of cabbages and broccoli.

"When my son told me they were cannabis plants I couldn't believe it," says Hart. "We called the police and they said what I had stumbled upon was the handiwork of guerrilla cannabis growers – they plant marijuana on other people's land and return three months later to harvest and sell it. I've been farming 50 years and that's the first time I have ever heard of anything like it."

Cannabis cultivation, carried out everywhere from inner-city lofts to patches of remote farmland, is booming in Britain. Plants are being grown and harvested at record levels to cater for a rapidly changing UK cannabis market. Ten years ago only 11 per cent of cannabis sold in UK streets was grown here, a figure which has now passed 60 per cent. Home-grown marijuana filled the hole left because of widespread disillusionment

with the quality of imported cannabis resin among drug users. At the same time, according to the UN, Morocco's cannabis crop – a key source of imported UK cannabis resin – has been shrunk by almost a half in three years under a government eradication scheme.

EVERYTHING'S GONE GREEN

A *Druglink* investigation into marijuana supply within Britain has revealed the staggering number of cannabis farms in operation, as police and cannabis growers take part in an increasingly heated battle to detect and protect the cash crop.

Over the last six months, since the launch last September of Operation Keymer, a two-week national police crackdown on cannabis farms, production sites have been raided at the rate of at least three a day in Britain. More than 1,500 cannabis farms – 62 per month – have been closed down in London alone in the last two years – three times the amount shut between 2003-2005.

And the majority of farms being discovered across the UK are not mere windowsill hobbies. Police say 80 per cent of farms have more than 50 plants and that they are recovering an average of 400 plants per raid. Most set-ups are using simple to use, widely-available growing systems. The blueprint for most of the farms raided involved over-head lights, fans and plant pots. The



electricity meter was usually bypassed to power the high intensity lamps without raising suspicion from suppliers. One cannabis farm, police found, had been wired up to nearby street lamps. Baths are used as nurseries and plants are usually crammed into lofts, summerhouses, cellars and toilets. Some were fitted with reflective foil on the walls, ventilation ducts and cellophane-covered windows. Less than one in 10 farms are using more expensive and technical hydroponic systems, which consist of irrigated troughs and strong chemicals.

"Everyone is looking for a way into the market," says one grower. "We know how much money is to be made, we read it in the papers, it's just getting the property so you can get a crop on."

VIETNAMESE

The analysis of nationwide police raids reveals around two-thirds to three quarters of cannabis farms were run by Vietnamese criminal gangs. Initially police thought Vietnamese-run cannabis farms were restricted to the Greater London area. But in the last year they have also been found dominating the illicit industry in south Wales, Birmingham, East Anglia, Yorkshire and the North-East.

Alongside reports of residential properties, industrial units on trading estates have also been used by gangs hoping to hide the high energy

consumption alongside legitimate business that draw from a communal power source.

Many of the growers caught at Vietnamese-run farms, some as young as 15, are illegal immigrants. Some are coerced into living in cramped conditions in rented properties to act as human sprinkler systems as payback to the gangs which brought them into the country. Police have found growers living in cupboards, tiny utility rooms, lofts and on airbeds in the hallway to enable maximum space for plants.

"Some of the Vietnamese growers have been smuggled over here and have paid good money," says Det Insp Neil Hutchison, of the Met's Serious and Organised Crime Squad, who was also central to the planning of Operation Keymer. "But once here they find themselves under the thumb of gangs who will push them into working on cannabis farms. There is an element of compulsion. Some will get paid a pittance, while others get a percentage of the profits – it differs between gangs."

Paul, a spokesman for one of the largest UK cannabis seed banks, said: "There has been a steady growth in the UK homegrown and farming sector since 2001. In the past four years Vietnamese gangs have taken over wholesale farming. They know what they are doing, they're trained, professional and it's increasingly widespread. ... 8

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7 ♦♦♦ “The start up costs from can be anything from £10,000 to £20, 000,” an outlay that Paul says can be recouped three months later with the first harvest. “Once set up, the gangs place an illegal immigrant, also called a ‘ghost’, as a house and plant sitter.” But Paul says that far from being the producers of super-strength skunk reported in some newspapers, the Vietnamese gangs opt for high-yield crops, such as that grown from Euphoria seeds.

“Connoisseur brands of cannabis seed, such as White Widow, Blueberry or AK47 produce so-called super skunk, with a THC level of 15 per cent, while that grown from Euphoria, known as commercial weed, weighs in at just 10 per cent. The Vietnamese growers opt for early flowering plants – six weeks as opposed to nine.”

SECRET GARDEN

“We all wondered why on earth they always kept the lights on and the curtains drawn, even in the height of summer!” a 72-year-old resident of the sleepy Surrey village of Thorpe remembered after a group of ‘catering workers’ rented a house in her street. What police found when they raided the home, following a tip off from suspicious neighbours, was a network of irrigation systems and carpets oozing water. As the niece of the shocked owner wrote in the *Times* in October: “Row upon row of lamps hung from huge bolts in the walls creating subtropical conditions. A ceiling had collapsed and my uncle ‘nearly fainted’ when he saw the hole made in the roof. The Andrew Martin three-piece suite had been chopped up and discarded; the oak four-poster reconditioned to form a bench in the kitchen upon which the two farmers slept, every other piece of furniture dismantled and each door removed. It took three skips to clear the debris.” In their six months of occupation the skunk farmers had earned an estimated £100,000 from two crops, caused a further £10,000 in damage, left a £6,000 electricity bill and wiped £20,000 from the value of the house.

TENANTS

The constant need for growers to find property is a headache also has implications for those who let property on a commercial basis. Police have sent letters to landlords and letting agencies to warn them of the dangers and damage to properties incurred by renting to cannabis growers.

One lettings estate agent, VJ Verdi of Handsworth, Birmingham, says: “Of course it’s worrying for those involved in letting property, a lot of private landlords are getting their fingers burnt. Drug gangs from the Far East are posing as families, they have all the right documents, and often offer to pay double the monthly rental value. A three-bedroom house in this area gets about £600 a month, it must be very tempting to a private landlord, even if he has suspicions, to take £1200 if it’s offered.

“It’s only later that they find the property had been converted to a cannabis farm, sometimes causing thousands of pounds worth of damage. There are also legal implications for private landlords if they appear to have colluded or turned a blind eye to drug related activities.”

But the disruption of so many Vietnamese-run cannabis farms in the last six months – accompanied by a blaze of publicity in local newspapers from the Bexhill to Gateshead – has had a negative impact on Britain’s Vietnamese community. A report by the Runnymede Trust, *The Vietnamese Community in Great Britain: Thirty Years On*, has criticised the Met Police’s guidance for landlords in Barnet, north London which states “almost invariably residents of these [premises used as cannabis factories] will be of Vietnamese origin. Estate agents and landlords should beware of lone females, possibly Vietnamese, trying to rent property.” In advising landlords to beware of Vietnamese individuals trying to rent property, said the report, the police are in breach of the Race Relations Act.

DETECTION

Of the cannabis farms discovered in the last six months, the majority were detected using what police call ‘community intelligence’ – a mixture of beat bobbies, local tradesmen, landlords or neighbours spotting something suspicious about a property. The longer a farm maintains production, the more likely it is to be busted, whether is by high tech surveillance, a nosy neighbour or a postman with a good sense of smell.

During Operation Keymer, the public were encouraged by police to play spot the cannabis farm. Properties with covered windows, late night visitors, lots of black bin liners, compost and gardening equipment out the back and vents coming out of rear windows may all indicate the presence of a cannabis farm. Yet many have simply been found because of a strong cannabis smell wafting from a property. Farms have been detected after tip-offs from electricity companies which have identified properties which are bypassing the meter, while others have drawn attention to themselves after re-wiring or faulty lights have

GRIT WEED: A DROUGHT PRODUCT

The vulnerability of the new, localized UK marijuana market from police raids on cannabis farms was exposed with the emergence of what some people have called 'grit weed' last year. Large-scale cannabis producers took advantage of a drought created by Operation Keymer to flood the market with adulterated weed, designed to give the producers a maximum return on their profits from drug users eager to get their hands on whatever cannabis was available.

Police and cannabis experts say the producers of the rogue weed, which prompted an NHS hazard warning because of its lung-damaging properties, sprayed plants with silica, tiny glass beads used to make road paint reflective. The silica not only boosted the weight of a consignment but fooled people into thinking the product was covered in trichomes, crystal-like nodules on marijuana buds which make cannabis a higher grade. In fact, the trichomes had been removed and sold separately. According to one cannabis seller, the contaminated cannabis was produced in Holland and distributed by Liverpool drugs gangs, although police could not confirm this.

Derek Williams, spokesman of UK Cannabis Internet Activists, said: "The grit weed would not have happened without Operation Keymer. The raids created a hole in the market which was filled with someone producing the adulterated weed. There are huge quantities of adulterated weed in Europe, especially France and England. The beads were probably sprayed onto the plants using a hand held aerosol spray with glass beads in the propellant. You can't tell immediately because the tiny beads are buried in the buds so people are still buying it. The regretful thing about this is that the government is refusing to control cannabis as a drug and this is putting people's health at risk."

caused a fire. The London Fire Brigade say last year 50 cannabis farms were unveiled as a result of house fires. Police have been alerted to the presence of numerous farms after neighbours have spotted burglars running away with plants.

Heat emission from farms, picked up using handheld or helicopter-mounted heat seeking devices, is a key factor in busting farms. "Images are used by officers on the ground to get the authority of the courts to execute search warrants," says Sgt Paul Fraley, unit executive officer of West Midlands Police's Air Operations Unit. "I am sure they do their very best to try to suppress the heat, but heat has to escape from the building somewhere. It can't just disappear and if it is diverted somewhere else we'll spot it."

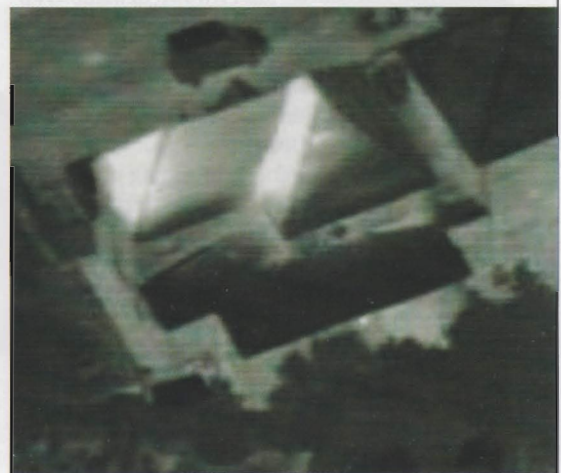
As police turn up the heat, cannabis farmers are trying their best to avoid detection. Front rooms will be sacrificed as plant space in order to make homes appear lived in – complete with Christmas trees and children's mobiles. Even in more rural areas, growers go to great lengths to conceal farms. Police found one production line of 400 plants at the site of an abandoned chicken factory on the outskirts of Hartlepool. They accessed it by smashing through a padlocked door and entering a hole in a wall which had been covered by a filing cabinet.

But if farmers are feeling too nervy about using a property that could be traced back to them, they can always use someone else's. And as reported in

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October in *Druglink*, although police often find themselves up to their necks in cannabis plants, dealers admit that law enforcement is far more capable of hitting supply in a market fuelled by local supplies rather than international imports.

Some lower level dealers are offering regular customers good money to rent spare rooms and in some cases paying for extended holidays for clients abroad while dealers grow one-off harvests before moving on. And, as Cornish farmer Peter Hart and gardening writer Tom Montgomery discovered, growers will also use other people's gardens to plant marijuana seeds. "If the police had discovered the seedlings first I would have had some awkward questions to answer," says Montgomery, who found 168 baby plants at his Yorkshire plot.



PUNISHMENT

According to *A Growing Market*, a report into the UK cannabis cultivation market published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2003, the police and the courts vary widely in how they deal with offences of cannabis cultivation. "In cases that are broadly similar, offenders are sometimes charged with production (a trafficking offence), and sometimes with the lesser charge of cultivation."

The report said there were 1,960 cannabis production offences in the UK in 2000. Of these offenders, just under a quarter (458) received a police caution. The remainder (1,502) were dealt with in court; just under a fifth (243) received a custodial sentence.

There were 802 farms raided by the Met Police between 2005-6, while in the same year the force only charged 304 people with cannabis production. DI Hutchison says the relatively low raid to criminal charge hit rate is because there are not always growers present at the farms they discover. "A lot of the time no-one is at the farm when we go in because sometimes you have two growers servicing five properties – so they are not there all the time. Other times the factory would have been cleared out leaving remainders such as plant pots. On several occasions we have been alerted by landlords who have had their keys posted back by tenants who have written notes saying the damage can be taken out of their deposit. ●