

After the 'Acapulco Gold' Rush

Jodi Torpey

When small groups of inquisitive students sign up for Grow-101, they're just like beginning gardeners everywhere. They want to understand plant basics, find out about fertilizers and ask a lot of questions. The main difference between this class and other gardening classes is these growers want to learn how to grow just one type of plant.

The Grow School, based in downtown Denver, offers Grow-101 to anyone interested in growing medical marijuana. Since 2009 about 600 students have graduated from the half-day, hands-on class that specializes in techniques for growing high-quality organic marijuana. The average student is male, middle-aged and retired. Many are veterans and most of the students have never grown anything before. Cannabis University, dubbed "The Harvard of Pot Schools" by Westword, has been holding regular classes in Denver since 2008. They offer an all-in-one-day class for \$250 for two people. Even Front Range Community College (Longmont campus) now offers a class on growing pot hydroponically.

It was 2000 when Colorado voters passed Amendment 20, establishing the Medical Marijuana Registry and effectively legalizing small amounts of medical marijuana for patients and their caregivers. There were no licensed dispensaries at that time; however, patients with a registry identification card could have two ounces of marijuana in their possession and they were allowed to grow six plants.

That's where David DeGraff, The Grow School founder and CEO, stepped in. As a registered medical marijuana patient, he understood how challenging it was for some patients to acquire their medicine. He started the Colorado Kindness Association to connect growers to terminally ill patients who needed access to medical marijuana, but were unable to afford it

"They could grow cannabis for four months, have enough to last a year, and then use the equipment to grow herbs or start their vegetable garden transplants."

or to grow it.

"I started looking at grower's operations and seeing their problems instead of successes," he said. "I could see that even professional growers had problems because of overconfidence in growing too many plants or lack of attention to detail."

He decided it would be beneficial to teach people how to grow marijuana on their own, instead of having to rely on someone else. "I like the idea of empowerment," he said.

"There is poor product, immature product, over-fertilized product, problems with mold and other things you can't see, but we can test for. Growing your own is the best way to

keep track of what people are putting in their bodies."

Organically Grown in Soil

The Grow-101 class covers the legal and safety aspects of growing marijuana, details for setting up a grow room, cannabis grow theory and how to troubleshoot problems. With the \$99 registration fee, each student also receives one year of free garden support to help diagnose and remedy any plant problems.

Instead of starting with a

new cash crop.

Loren Bauman, owner and manager of Jared's Nursery and Garden Center in Littleton, said before Amendment 20 was passed, federal drug laws prevented garden centers from discussing methods for growing marijuana.

"You couldn't even say 'marijuana' while on the property," Bauman said. "But everyone had their own term for it and would refer to it as 'medicinal herbs' or 'medical tomatoes'."

Boom and Bust in Colorado

"When medical marijuana was legalized it was huge for garden centers," said Trela Phelps, general manager of City Floral and president of the Garden Centers of Colorado.

"It allowed us to expand our hydroponic department. We always offered hydroponics, but suddenly there was a huge demand for lights and equipment because people were doing it on a large scale and outfitting warehouses."



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CANNABIS UNIVERSITY All-in-one-day class at Cannabis University in Denver.

hydroponics system, students learn to grow their plants in soil and under grow tents to help ensure success. "Soil is a little more forgiving of mistakes," DeGraff said.

Even if inexperienced growers don't have a passion for gardening, they do have a passion for saving money and having control of their stash, DeGraff said. He estimates an average marijuana user can save between \$1200 and \$1500 a year by growing his or her own supply versus purchasing at a dispensary.

DeGraff anticipates more students signing up for the Grow-101 class

Once medical marijuana was legalized and the dispensary system in place, revenue at some garden centers increased 5-15 percent in sales of grow lights and hydroponic systems, Bauman said. However that additional revenue withered within two years.

"It dropped off because of people failing in their endeavor and all the hydroponic and aeroponic hardware becoming available on Craigslist," Bauman said. "A few garden centers sold all their hydroponic equipment to other retailers who specialize in grow operations."

Sales of organic fertilizers for hydroponic growing remain steady at Jared's and with Amendment 64 on the books, there's increased interest in growing marijuana, especially from a different kind of garden center customer.

"In our store, those under the age of 21 are talking about it, are more open about it and they're wanting to build systems. It's a younger demographic and we have to be careful," he said.

"Marijuana is just a plant until you do something with it. We sell other plants that are harmful, too. Foxglove is a poison and morning glory seeds have hallucinogenic effects if eaten. Do I worry about it? Yes. But I can't police my customers."

Bauman recognizes that Colorado's new marijuana law is an opportunity to attract new customers and to educate them on how to grow organically.

"There's wrong information on the Internet about plants and growing and we want to get them the right information," he said.

Many garden centers chose to dive in and others decided against it. City Floral, located in Denver, created a new location in the store for hydroponic equipment and supplies to meet the demand. It was all cash revenue.

In a good year, the garden center would sell about \$2000 in hydroponic supplies to home gardeners, but that jumped to \$150,000 a year in the first medical marijuana go around, she said.

"It was sort of a gold rush opportunity," Phelps said. "But it peaked around 2010."

She doesn't anticipate another big rush from Amendment 64 because so many grow operations already exist.

"We threw seminars for the industry about the opportunity and had our Denver City Council representative from District 5, Mary Beth Susman, explain the proposed law. It was a diverse audience of wholesalers and retailers and different sizes of garden centers from our area, Fort Collins and neighboring areas," she said.

"But the consensus was that marijuana isn't going to be a major growth opportunity for garden centers. That's what Colorado is all about, boom and bust."

Jodi Torpey is an experienced gardener, garden writer and author of "The Colorado Gardener's Companion: An Insider's Guide to Gardening in the Centennial State." Her writing appears on home and garden websites and in national, regional and local publications. Send questions, comments and column ideas to Jodi@WesternGardeners.com.

