

# TrailBlazin' it

You are probably here for one of two reasons—either you want to avoid marijuana or you want to smoke it. Regardless, you’ve come to the right place!

## **A Quick History Lesson**

Marijuana is the dried hemp plant called *cannabis sativa*, which has many compounds in it, including but not limited to delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), a psychoactive chemical<sup>i</sup>. There are many ways to consume marijuana, the most common being smoking it in hand-rolled cigarettes called joints, smoking it in pipes called bongs, and smoking it in cigars that have had the tobacco replaced by a mixture of tobacco and marijuana. Food and drinks can also be laced with marijuana and the cannabis plant itself can be concentrated in a resin known as hashish or it can be manufactured into a black, sticky liquid called hash oil.

The Appalachian region has always been a seeding ground for marijuana because the region has an ideal climate, the perfect hydrology, great soil, and a lot of tree coverage, useful to marijuana farmers for camouflaging their crop. The only area with a larger marijuana business than that of the Appalachian region is California<sup>ii</sup>.

Contrary to popular belief, marijuana growers are not always hardened criminals. Typically, growers are either hard-core criminals or just entrepreneurs trying to supplement their income or their family’s income in any way necessary.

A region called the “marijuana belt” exists in the Appalachia and consists of 65 counties in the states of West Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. So called for the rampant growth of marijuana in the area, the “marijuana belt” states are some of the most economically destitute in the country with the median income below \$8,000 annually<sup>iii</sup>. In fact, in Kentucky, the state with the greatest concentration of marijuana grow sites in any given year, unemployment rates are often in the double digits, ranging anywhere from 13%-15%, according to Ed Shemalya, the head of Marijuana Eradication in the Appalachian High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area<sup>iv</sup>. Widespread unemployment and a lack of sustainable opportunity turns many people towards farming marijuana to maintain their livelihood. And why not? By an estimate of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the street value of the average, mature marijuana plant is around

## THE LAW

According to the federal government, marijuana is a Schedule I substance, meaning it has no medical use and has a high risk for abuse. Nevertheless, medicinal marijuana has been legalized in 21 states and two states have already legalized it for adult recreational use.

\$2,000<sup>v</sup>. Given that the typical farm size is approximately 100 plants, the average revenue generated by a single marijuana farm in a one year could be around \$200,000!

### **Where can you get some?**

The only way to get marijuana on the Appalachian Trail is to know a guy. Lucky for you, almost everyone in the area of grow sites knows who the growers in the region are so when you hit a trail town, all you have to do is ask around and someone will be able to help you out. Also, people tend to be very friendly on the trail and have few qualms sharing their stores.

It gets better. Since growing and using marijuana has become such an accepted part of the culture in the Appalachia, law enforcement agencies often have a difficult time trying to get juries to indict, let alone convict, growers even when they present extensive and unquestionable evidence<sup>vi</sup>. What does this mean for you? It means you can almost always get away with possessing marijuana. In fact, the only times anyone would even stop you on the trail to check are if you just reek of marijuana or if you're being a nuisance, according to many hikers<sup>vii</sup>. Even then, you would only run into a problem if a ranger caught you.

### **SLANG**

Marijuana has many street names including weed, pot, grass, dope, Mary Jane, hash, herb, Aunt Mary, blunt, boom, cheeba, Juanita, Donna Juana, blanket, flower tops, roach, and jolly green. There are even more names, especially for marijuana mixed with other substances, but these are some of the most common.

Generally speaking, marijuana on the AT is incredibly and unsurprisingly common and you would not have any difficulties finding some or using some.

### **Be wary of the effects...**

As common as marijuana can be on the AT, it is still imperative that you understand the effects, both good and bad, of using the drug.

Marijuana contains psychoactive drugs. When people get "high" on marijuana, they can experience altered perceptions of reality, difficulties in thinking, remembering, learning, and problem solving, mood swings, and impaired coordination.

An irritant to the lungs as well, marijuana can have adverse effects on the respiratory system allowing for a greater number of lung infections, daily cough and phlegm issues, and a greater risk for other chest illnesses. Basically, smoking marijuana can have the same impact on your lungs as smoking virtually anything else. It's bad. Marijuana can also increase the heart rate enough that some users experience a heart attack within the first hour after using. Some studies have shown a link between long-term mental illnesses and marijuana as well. Users put themselves at an increased risk for psychosis, anxiety attacks, depression, and personality

disorders. Finally, although this should not be an issue on the trail, marijuana can also impair driving, though to a lesser extent than alcohol does<sup>viii</sup>.

The fact is there are negative side effects associated with the use of any drug and marijuana is no exception. While this is not meant to completely discourage you from using marijuana, let this serve as a fair warning. Still, there are some pros to using marijuana in moderation. Though the FDA has not explicitly permitted the use of the marijuana medicinally, it has approved the use of other THC-related drugs in medication. Medicinal marijuana has already proven effective in the treatment of several diseases including alcohol abuse, leukemia, Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease, epilepsy, dystonia, hepatitis-C, and many more<sup>ix</sup>.

### **How do you avoid marijuana?**

Of course, the obvious answer is to just not smoke marijuana. You have a choice. Make the choice that suits you the best. Unfortunately, the fact of the matter is that marijuana will be on the trail, whether you like it or not. There is always a possibility that you will run into other hikers that smoke it (which to be honest, should not be much of a problem) or that you will accidentally stumble into some growers or stumble onto a grow site (this is much more of a problem...).



Outdoor Marijuana Farm<sup>x</sup>

Each year the federal government confiscates billions of dollars of marijuana, especially in the “marijuana belt”. However, this has done very little to stop growers. Quite the opposite actually, farmers have continued to grow marijuana, but their attitudes are completely different. Whereas in the past if you happened upon a grower they may have offered you a joint, growers have become increasingly more violent as of late. The war on drugs has played its part in increasing the stakes and growers have responded suit by setting up traps around their grow sites.

Traps that you could run into include the following<sup>xi</sup>:

- Pipe bombs with trip wires
- Fishing hooks placed face-high along the trail
- Sharpened bamboo sticks
- Bear traps
- Boards with 3-inch nails sticking out of them that are scattered and hidden on the ground
- Poisonous snakes that are aggravated and then tied to the property with wires (No, I am not kidding. This has been used before.)

So how do you avoid running into any of these issues with growers or grow sites? Know how to recognize if you are walking into a grow site. Typically, grow sites are situated in remote, steep terrain. Below is a list of tell-tale signs of a marijuana grow site<sup>xiii</sup>:

- Bluish green patches and earthen trails
- Random hoses and drip lines in unexpected places
- Well-used trails where there ought not to be any well-used trails leading off the main trail
- People loitering, especially armed with rifles out of hunting season, without any vehicles nearby
- Campsites with fertilizers, rat poison, weapons and dead animals
- Small propane bottles littered on the ground (because these can be used to mask the scent of wood smoke)

If you suspect you are on a grow site, leave. Whether you want to smoke marijuana or not, leave immediately. If you want to help local law enforcement agencies, identifying a GPS location or some landmark might be useful and then you can leave the property, get to safe location, and subsequently report the location to forest services or the local law enforcement agency. Under no circumstances should you attempt to confront a grower alone or continue to remain on the property. Seriously, just leave.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> "DrugFacts: Marijuana." *National Institute of Drug Abuse*. USA.gov, 1 Jan. 2014. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> Alford, Roger. "\$1.5B worth of Marijuana Confiscated in Appalachia." *Businessweek* 5 Dec. 2012. Bloomberg L.P. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> King, Lisa. "Marijuana and the Reality of the War on Drugs: It's a Cash Crop for Appalachia." *Washington Times Communities* 17 July 2012. The Washington Times, LLC. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.

<sup>iv</sup> Alford.

<sup>v</sup> Alford.

<sup>vi</sup> Kenning, Chris. "Kentucky Goes after 'Marijuana Belt' Growers." *USA Today* 30 Sept. 2007. USA Today. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.

<sup>vii</sup> "Marijuana on the Appalachian Trail." Grasscity.com. 420Network BV, 8 Mar. 2010. Web. 15 Oct. 2014.

<sup>viii</sup> "DrugFacts: Marijuana".

<sup>ix</sup> King.

<sup>x</sup> *Outdoor Cannabis Farming*. 2013.

<sup>xi</sup> Kenning.

<sup>xii</sup> Westcott, Stevin. "What to Do If You Encounter a Marijuana Cultivation Site." *U.S. Forest Service*. USDA.gov, 26 May 2011. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.