

## **Cannamania: An Exploration of the First Licensed Producer Led Cannabis Cup in Canada**

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In the spring of 2019, while I was an undergraduate student, I decided to visit the first legal dispensary in my city. I was happy that the era of shady weed transactions was over and that any adult of legal age could purchase cannabis without legal consequences. If you were lucky enough to have a “good dealer,” you would know what you were getting pre-legalization. Otherwise, if you wanted weed, you would get what was available. As someone curious about cannabis, I was excited to see the selection of products from the recreational market. When I entered the cannabis store, the person verifying identification cards handed me a menu. The menu was divided into Sativa, Indica, and Hybrid. At that time, I understood the North American folk plant types Indica (sedative effects) and Sativa (uplifting effects). However, I did not recognize the strain names and became overwhelmed at the selection. I asked the sales associate if I could see the buds, and he told me that I had to purchase the product first. I then asked what strain they would recommend from experience. The sales associate said that he could not make any recommendations because it was not permitted, but they could educate me on THC and CBD percentages. I was struck by their answer and questioned how it was possible that a plant such as cannabis, which is easily identified by its pungent odour and psychoactive experiences, could not be discussed in this manner post-legalization?

### **Cannabis Grow Cups: From Underground to Mainstream**

The High Times Cannabis Cup is one of the leading cannabis competitions, festivals and trade shows that celebrates cannabis through competitions, seminars, expositions, celebrity appearances, concerts, and product showcases. The cannabis cup was founded in Amsterdam in 1988 by former High Times editor Steve Hager and has evolved into a globally recognized championship of the best cannabis products. As the event grew in popularity, awards became more prestigious, and for seed banks, it translated into increased sales of winning strains to cultivators (Janikian 2019). By the 2000s, the cup had grown into a cannabis extravaganza and could no longer continue as an underground enterprise. Instead, the High Times Cannabis cup marketing clout became the new king of cannabis.

Micheal Pollan, in an article for the New York Times, writes about "how, in little more than a decade, marijuana growing in America had evolved from a hobby of ageing hippies into a burgeoning high-tech industry with earnings that are estimated at \$32 billion a year" (Pollan 1995). Making cannabis America's biggest cash crop compared to corn (\$14 billion) or soybeans (\$11 billion) (Ibid.). To avoid criminal penalties, cannabis gardeners moved indoors, making cannabis farming less dependent on soil and sunlight and more on technology. Indoor gardening not only thrived in state-of-the-art facilities but in downtown apartments and lofts, in suburban basements and attics, even in closets (Ibid). Moving cannabis cultivation indoors "sparked an intensive period of research and development, including selective breeding for potency, size and early harvest, and a raft of technological advances aimed at speeding photosynthesis by manipulating the growing environment" (Ibid).

Growing from seed was not the only way gardeners grew their cannabis plants. They also learned how to clone and pollinate their female plants. Pollan comments that around 1987, gardeners in America and the Netherlands started to adapt “the growing regimen known as the Sea of Green, in which dozens of tightly packed and genetically identical female plants are grown in tight quarters under carefully regulated artificial conditions” (Ibid). The technologies, gadgets, growing guides, and techniques were shared in the columns of High Times and Sinsemilla Tips. Therefore, “the Sea of Green belongs to no one horticulturist but rather to hundreds of gardeners working independently in the States and in the Netherlands” (Ibid).

With several raids of indoor cannabis both in the United States and the Netherlands, the Cannabis Cup had produced a dark cloud over the competitions. However, as the legalization and decriminalization of medical and recreational cannabis pressed forward in other parts of the world and certain states in America, Amsterdam was no longer the only place to hold such an event. So, the High Times Cannabis Cup set sail for the New World and gave birth to many new competitions. Today there are multiple cups held across the globe each year, all united in the pursuit of growing the best cannabis. The advances in cultivation and genetics that the competition had encouraged improved the potency, flavour and aroma of cannabis to never before seen heights. It’s no coincidence that during the 1990s and early 2000s, cannabis quality took its most remarkable strides.

### **Canada’s first LP Cannabis Cup: From Seed to Molecule**

My Master’s research project explores how cannabis cultivation practices are (un)done post-legalization by participating in the first Licensed Producer cannabis cup held in Canada. From August 2021 to December 2021, I conducted in-person fieldwork following one gardener’s process of growing cannabis to compete in the first Licensed Producer Cannabis Cup. I entered the field with pre-conceived ideas about cannabis and home gardeners. I guess you can say that I was mesmerized by the mystic that surrounds the plant. I was also curious about how to grow aesthetically pleasing plants like the ones on the cover of High Times magazine.

Jack, my growing mentor, is a licensed ACMPR (Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations) medical grower. In Canada, medical cannabis has been decriminalized since 2001. Under the ACMPR, individuals can access medical cannabis from a licensed producer, grow their own, or assign someone to produce for them with an approved license to grow (Health Canada 2016). During my first visit to my mentor’s home, he quickly reminded me that he was a medical grower and showed me his Health Canada approved license that allows him to grow up to ten plants. Jack has always been a proponent of cannabis legalization, and respecting the laws and regulations is crucial to him. Interestingly, the grow cup was open to both medical and recreational growers. This allowed me to be attentive to the ways my mentor and the people I met throughout fieldwork differentiated medical cannabis from recreational cannabis.

\*Several cannabis cups take place in the United States. The High Times Cannabis Cup is the most popular. Other cannabis cups include the Emerald Cup (California), Aloha Cup (Hawaii), and Bio Cup (Vancouver Island), to name a few.

My mentor never disclosed his medical conditions to me. However, during one of our conversations, he told me that he likes to have the ability to grow his medicinal plants at home because he wants access to clean and organic plants. He says that it is not that the medical cannabis from Licensed Producers is not clean. On the contrary, medical license producers must grow indoors and in highly sterilized environments to ensure that the plants are safe and healthy. But, Jack prefers to grow his own because he likes to research and implement his own knowledge and techniques to produce his own medicine. For example, the seeds he grew this year were selected with the intention to make edibles out of them.

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Anyone of legal age can grow four plants for recreational use in Ontario. I decided to take part in the cannabis cup because I wanted to learn how to grow good weed. I had previously attempted to grow. However, I failed. So, this was an excellent opportunity to learn along as I followed my mentor through his own growing process. I decided to grow my plant indoors because it would prevent confrontations with my next-door neighbour, who likes to complain about the plant's smell. I also thought I would have more control over the whole growing process.

I had been enchanted by the futuristic and mystical imagery of cannabis plants like the ones on the cover of High Times magazine. So I aspired to grow those monstrous or alien-looking plants under the LED lights. My objective was to produce an aesthetically pleasing plant with a pungent smell.

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Cannabis has coevolved with humans to satisfy various therapeutic, recreational, and religious needs (Ribeiro 2018, 134). So, it is no surprise that we have selected genetic characteristics to meet specific human needs (Ribeiro 2018, 134). To this day, there are over 700 “strains” (cultivars) of cannabis, “each with characteristic concentrations of hundreds of substances of therapeutic interest, such as cannabinoids, terpenes, and phenols” (Ribeiro 2018, 134). THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol) and CBD (Cannabidiol), the most studied cannabinoids of cannabis, possess therapeutic potential, with preliminary and advanced empirical evidence regarding a wide range of diseases (Ribeiro 2018, 134). However, these substances (in isolation) may have adverse health effects (136). Yet, both compounds in cannabis compliment or blur the effects. Chemists Raphael Mechoulam and Simon Bed-Shabat use the term “entourage effect” “to refer to the cooperative effects of the multiple compounds present in whole organisms that may potentiate clinical efficacy while attenuating side effects (Ribeiro 2018, 135).”

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The cannabis cup had four cultivars that participants could choose from; Pink Lemonade (Pink Kush x Lemon Skunk, Power Kush (OG Kush x Power Plant), Pineapple Express (Photoperiod), Bubba Kush (Death Bubba x Bubba Kush 2). Jack grew two cultivars, Pineapple Express for the cannabis cup and Pink Lemonade. I also decided to grow the Pineapple Express because of the "stoner" comedy Pineapple Express (2008), starring Seth Rogan and James Franco.

The company hosting the cannabis cup declined an interview. So, it is uncertain where the seeds come from or how they came to be. One thing that is worthy to note and requires further exploration is that the government of Canada assign seed banks from which all licensed producers could access seeds (Cannabis Act 2018, 10 (1)). Interestingly, there is an exception under the Cannabis Act which states that "A holder of a licence for cultivation is authorized to possess cannabis plants and cannabis plant seeds that were not obtained in accordance with subsection (1) if the holder had submitted to the Minister, with the licence application, a declaration, signed and dated by the individual who signed and dated the application, indicating the quantity of such cannabis plants and cannabis plant seeds that they will have in their possession on the effective date of the licence" (Cannabis Act 2018, 10 (2)). In other words, as long as a licence holder declares the seeds and plants with the license application, they can have non-government-approved seeds and plants on the premise on the effective date of the licence. Which makes one wonder where these plants and seeds come from. I was unaware of the sensibility of the exception. Until I attended a craft cannabis event in my city where I met a few people with micro-cultivation licenses who disclosed that they cannot bring in any other plants or seeds once the license is approved.

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The deadline to enter the grow cup was June 30, 2021. I signed up for the grow cup in mid-June, which was a late start compared to my mentor, who had started in April. I thought that I could make it happen if I followed the instructions. After all, I was going to grow indoors. I did a quick google search to see what cannabis stores around my city had the seeds and went out to purchase them.

I began the germination process on June 16, 2021.

*I am using the paper towel method to germinate the seed because it has a higher success rate.*

I had previously attempted to grow cannabis at the beginning of the pandemic and failed. However, I was successful in the germination process. So, I repeated the same steps. I had never seriously tried to grow a plant from seed and from the grow guides I read, the paper towel method guaranteed a higher germination rate.

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*"When I first started to grow, I used commercial soil and pots. I like using Jiffy pots for germination, it's easy, all you have to do is add water to the soilless soil and allow the seed to sprout. They are available everywhere and are used for other plants. So, why should it be any different for cannabis?" - Jack*

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I decided to grow my plant in commercial soil. The first five weeks were easygoing because I attentively controlled everything manually. However, with a rise in Covid-19 cases and public health restrictions, I experienced a bit of a pandemic depression. Since home and work are both under the same roof, my sleeping schedule started to get out of control. With nowhere to go and

only deadlines to meet, sleeping late became a habit. I was no longer following a consistent sleeping schedule and, as a result, neglected the plant I was so passionate about growing.

The plant could not keep up with my schedules, and it was yelling at me silently (yellowing, stunted height, dehydration, etc.). So, to solve my problem, I bought an automated switch for the lights and fan. This way, I did not have to worry about its light cycle. I was again back on track to growing the best possible weed I could.

Between weeks 8-12, we experienced a heatwave which brought up many challenges. First, the heat in the room where the plant was growing was uncontrollable, and there was a lack of air circulation which made the plants droopy. I panicked and thought that the plant lacked water and ended up overwatering it. Secondly, the high humidity levels and lack of air circulation became a breeding ground for pests. My mentor and a few of the other growers I met through the grow cup gave me a few tips on how to get rid of spider mites. I decided to use a mixture of water and neem oil as a pesticide, and it was successful. However, the plant continued to look unhealthy, and it was not looking nice. I felt like a failure for not being able to successfully grow.

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When I started growing cannabis, I was focused and captivated by the end product. But, how was I supposed to grow excellent weed if I had not done it before? I had a preconceived idea and image about growing cannabis and viewed the plant as a concept or object to experiment with. It wasn't until I failed to learn to grow a plant that I learned how to grow.

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Jack and I were both excited to compete in the grow cup, I signed up to experience growing cannabis myself, and Jack signed up with intentions to meet other growers and show off his plants. The Grow Cup was straightforward; the winners would be the highest THC and terpene profile.

During the days I was not with Jack in the garden, I conducted online fieldwork, as the grow cup took place online due to the pandemic. I thought following the cannabis cup would be easy and straightforward as the organizers had created a designated space for the competitors and hashtags to follow. However, there was not much happening in the selected digital platforms, which caused me anxiety and frustration. By conducting participant observations following the cannabis cup online, I noticed how the competitors themselves created content and promoted the cannabis cup. Throughout the cannabis cup, the organizers posted five times on the digital platforms to remind competitors of deadlines. For instance, Jack created posts about his plants and growing methods to upload and tag the company. However, most of his posts were not re-shared, which made him feel like he was not being appreciated as a gardener. Halfway through the flowering stage, Jack stopped sharing weekly posts as it was apparent to him that "the cup is something they threw together to promote their seeds."

Within the legal framework of the Cannabis Act (2018), it is prohibited to promote cannabis or a cannabis accessory or any service related to cannabis, including

- (a)** by communicating information about its price or distribution;
- (b)** by doing so in a manner that there are reasonable grounds to believe could be appealing to young persons;
- (c)** by means of a testimonial or endorsement, however displayed or communicated;
- (d)** by means of the depiction of a person, character or animal, whether real or fictional; or
- (e)** by presenting it or any of its brand elements in a manner that associates it or the brand element with, or evokes a positive or negative emotion about or image of, a way of life such as one that includes glamour, recreation, excitement, vitality, risk or daring. (Cannabis Act 2018, 17 (1)).

There are, however, some exceptions where the Subdivision does not apply. This includes

- (a)** to a literary, dramatic, musical, cinematographic, scientific, educational or artistic work, production or performance that uses or depicts cannabis, a cannabis accessory or a service related to cannabis, or a brand element of any of those things, whatever the mode or form of its expression, if no consideration is given, directly or indirectly, for that use or depiction in the work, production or performance;
- (b)** to a report, commentary or opinion in respect of cannabis, a cannabis accessory or a service related to cannabis or a brand element of any of those things, if no consideration is given, directly or indirectly, for the reference to the cannabis, cannabis accessory, service or brand element in that report, commentary or opinion;
- (c)** to a promotion, by a person that is authorized to produce, sell or distribute cannabis, that is directed at any person that is authorized to produce, sell or distribute cannabis, but not, either directly or indirectly, at consumers; or
- (d)** to a promotion, by a person that sells or distributes cannabis accessories or that provides a service related to cannabis, that is directed at any person that sells or distributes cannabis accessories, at any person that is authorized to produce, sell or distribute cannabis, but not, either directly or indirectly, at consumers. (Cannabis Act 2018, 16).

Currently, what is acceptable from Health Canada's perspective is that to ensure safety and quality assurance, companies must disclose quantitative measures that can inform the consumer about the product without explicitly selling them an experience. This explains why the sales associate could not disclose his experience with me the first time I went to the cannabis store. After that, I was aware of the legislation around cannabis. However, the laws and regulations became more apparent during the grow cup.

Jack works at a cannabis store. He often shared his frustrations and concerns about the exploitation of THC and CBD percentages from cannabis companies. What is interesting about this insight is that technically speaking cannabis companies can only inform the consumer about the product using metrics. Jack says that cannabis used to be about having fun and feeling a buzz

but that the newer generations only care about high THC and feeling stoned. At his work, he says that consumers only care about the highest THC product, even if they might not be good, but that he cannot say anything or make any recommendations because he is there to process orders. Currently, there are no legislative limits for the percentage of THC in flower cannabis (Pusiak et al., 2021, 3). However, the biological upper limit for producing THC in Cannabis flower is approximately 30%, and often these estimates are inaccurate (Pusiak et al., 2021, 3). So, it seems that the regulatory burdens of cannabis promotion in Canada are giving rise to a new phenomenon.

Interestingly, Pollan writes that during a two-hour panel discussion on marijuana growing, the subject of potency received little attention compared to other qualities- taste, variety, aesthetics (Pollan 19 Feb. 1995). Pollan and others who have followed cannabis in North America and the Netherlands have remarked how quality for cannabis connoisseurs relies not upon selling or consuming the product. Instead, quality depends on the sensorial experience and the buds themselves that are closely examined and intently sniffed. This was the kind of experience that I was seeking by following the cannabis cup. However, one's expectations do not always match reality.

On the days I conducted in-person fieldwork, Jack and I would walk through the garden smelling, touching, feeling, inspecting, trimming, watering and “topping” the plants. The weeks leading to harvest were the most intense in checking on the plants instead of attending to them (see video).

Jack's preferred method of growing cannabis is outdoors. I was interested in working with Jack because he shares his methods and techniques for growing organic cannabis on social media. Through him, I was exposed to different types of cannabis gardeners. They were not the high-tech growers I had in mind when I first started to be interested in cannabis cultivation practices. Organic cannabis growers are like any other organic gardener. Their craftsmanship, methods and techniques vary. Jack, for instance, is passionate about living soil. The use of living soil is a method centred on the microbial and fungal life living in the soil that forms a soil food web that helps feed the plants, in exchange for carbons and sugars that the plant releases through their roots into the soil. This method of growing allows the plants to feed their own needs by finding what they require in the soil in which they live.

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I thought that growing cannabis would be an easy task. After all, many have grown cannabis in closets, basements, buckets, and attics. However, it was clear to me that if I followed the grow guides and the advice of my mentor, I would be successful. Follow the process for best results, I repeated to myself.

What is interesting and fascinating about growing a plant is that they are silent, self-sufficient organisms that do not require humans to survive. This became apparent when I naively thought

that I had killed my plant. The weeks after the spider mite infestation, the plant was not “responsive,” nothing was changing despite my efforts to save it. Finally, feeling guilty and ashamed for failing to learn how to grow a plant, I took the plant out of the tent and placed it on a table in the room where I had the grow tent in. At that point, I had given up on it. I told my mentor about it, and his facial expressions spoke louder than words during that conversation.

For a week, the plant stayed on top of the table. I would walk past it and avoid looking at it but did not find it in myself to throw it out. The leaves were yellowing and curling downwards, the soil was drying up, it was visually screaming at me for help. A few days passed, and I decided that I would finally move on and throw it out. As I was going to pick up the plant and throw it out, its aroma ticked the tip of my nose, and my eyes were directed to the top leaves that were turning bright green. I was caught in what I thought was an “unbelievable” moment; the plant had managed to find its own way to survive. I immediately detached myself from my own selfish desires and needs and spent the afternoon taking care of it. I trimmed the dying leaves, replenished the soil, and watered it. I was once again back on track to growing cannabis. By this time, the deadline for bud submission for the cannabis cup was fast approaching. However, my plant was still vegetative, and I withdrew from the competition. It is now January 2022, and the plant is alive and in the last weeks of flowering.

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During one of our conversations, I asked Jack how he learned to grow using organic methods?

"I started to see pictures of these beautiful big plants and beautiful buds from California and Oregon, and I said why can't I grow those ones? I began to read more about their growing methods, and that is when I realized that I was doing it all wrong. I was growing using liquid nutrients but stopped after the first year. It was too much work. I had to mix the liquid nutrients to the correct amounts and test the PH levels at every stage, and I got tired of it. Some growers will tell you that organic methods lead to bigger plants and buds, but don't believe this theory. If you know how to grow using organic methods, you know that is not about the quantity. The information to grow cannabis is out there, but you have to want to learn it. That is fine if you don't want to learn and just grow with the bare minimum. However, I am learning as I go along, and I enjoy doing it, and I like growing more than consuming. I understand that there is this mystic to cannabis because it produces wonderful experiences, but it's a plant, so why should I treat it differently from tomatoes or squash? Growing cannabis is not rocket science. You have to work with the elements. You cannot stress about things individually. Instead, try to work with them all as much as possible. I do not have to worry about lights or the environment because the plants will find sunlight and feed their needs by growing outdoors. All I have to worry about is feeding the soil, watering the plants, and dealing with pests and intruders."

Why do you choose to grow your own cannabis?

"I like to grow from seed, not clones. I like the idea that the seed I have will turn out to be a 50-foot tall plant. I want to see the progression. I am not too worried about the



end product. It's more of an afterthought because I have access to cannabis for a lifetime. I don't consume too much, so I am not growing for that purpose. If I was growing for that purpose, I would probably be more stressed out. For example, if it rains on my plants, I don't care, of course, I worry, but I am not stressed about them. Other people panic and would cover them. I don't do that. If anything, I just shake off the excess water. I just like the whole process of growing. The hype for THC is not medical. If you look at medical cannabis, it will be higher in CBN. I like to see the whole process from seed to mature flower. That's the best part for me. It is a letdown after I harvest them because there is a little natural depression after you harvest because you put a lot of time and effort, and I am feeling it now. I am tired of burping. I wish I could just leave them in the jar until they are done, but I can't do that. I have to cure it correctly, even if it all is going to be for edibles. The work of growing is now over, it's all downstairs, but that is why I want to grow indoors in the winter, because I can keep the rush going.”

Through our conversation, it became clear that the legalization of both medical and recreational cannabis is undergoing a normalization process. Jack, for instance, prefers to grow his plants for medical purposes because he likes to have access to clean and organic plants, which he creates various products out of, for example, edibles. However, he also uses cannabis recreationally by consuming products from the recreational market. Now that cannabis is legal in Canada for medical and recreational use, there is no need to hide. The cannabis cup is an excellent example of how Canadians are curious and accepting of cannabis. Various levels of gardeners participated in the cannabis cup, and from my observations, outdoor growers were more likely to post images of their plants than indoor growers.

Although the cannabis cup was not what I expected it to be, it did provide the grounds for further inquiry regarding the legislative framework of the Cannabis Act that is worthy of further exploration. Canada legalized recreational cannabis on the basis that it would protect young Canadians by keeping the plant out of the hands of children and youth, keeping profit out of the hands of criminals, and protecting public health and safety by decreasing the risk and reducing the potential damages surrounding cannabis. Yet, with such harsh regulatory measures, a new phenomenon is rising; cannamania for the highest THC flowers.

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