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There's a reason why Alberta is Canada's hemp leader

The 'dope' on industrial hemp is that it's good news for Alberta producers looking for a new crop for their rotation

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These photos of Jan Slaski in his Vegreville hemp plots were taken five days apart in July 2004, and show how quickly hemp can grow. *Photo: Jan Slaski*

Farming Smarter – There was a time in Canada's history when homesteaders received free hemp seeds because the plant products served so many purposes. Hemp seed is a source of food and its stalks provide fibre.

Jan Slaski — Alberta's hemp expert — provided this tidbit of information when he spoke at the Farming Smarter AGM in February. His research in Vegreville now spans more than a decade, and his efforts to make hemp a viable, profitable crop had led to Alberta becoming Canada's leading hemp-growing province over the past five years.

I never thought about why hemp fell out of grace as a rope-manufacturing material. (Yes, I thought that was its only use.) However, many years ago, I lived in a southern Ontario farm community where hemp still grew wild in the ditches, decades after its days as a field crop were over.

So did asparagus, but that wasn't nearly as amusing — no one ever stopped and tried to smoke the asparagus. But that is why hemp fell out of favour after being one of the world's longest-standing and most widely grown crops. See, industrial hemp has one of those relatives you wish would stop showing up at family gatherings. So Canada banned it in the late 1930s and the UN banned it in 1961.

Slaski also told us the fascinating fact that hemp grows ridiculously fast. He had flanking photos dated about five days apart. The hemp plants had grown about two feet over that time and towered over him.

It occurs to me that hemp could easily replace corn mazes as a tourist attraction. In the centre of the hemp maze, you could have Lazy-Boy chairs, a big-screen TV, a beer fridge and a snack vending machine. You would make MILLIONS! Except, of course, industrial hemp can't give the vacant-head feeling its cousin does.

I like the idea of growing more hemp for cloth. I have difficulty wearing synthetics, so I'm always looking for natural-fibre clothes and they are hard to find. Hemp fibre clothes are as varied as cotton in texture and weight. Maybe that's because hemp provides two lengths of fibre as Slaski explained. The outside of the stalk yields longer strands than the inside — two fibres for the price of one!

Rope and clothes seem obvious, but Slaski had a photo of a truck canopy made of hemp fibre. It looked just like fibreglass. Hempcrete is an insulating wall material and hemp is used in erosion control mats. Calgary Olympic Park uses the latter and Motive Industries Inc. in Calgary uses hemp for car bodies. They call the car the Kestrel.

Alberta has some hemp advantages. Hemp is a short-day plant, which means the long days of northern summers delay the flowering and cause hemp to grow notably larger. It means Alberta farmers have excellent fibre-growing conditions and can still get the grain crop.

Now I will admit that I had never thought of hemp as a grain crop even though a hippie-dippy buddy of mine introduced me to hemp heart granola decades ago. Anywho, hemp grain also provides hemp oil, hemp hearts and hemp milk... and hippie-dippy granola.

Someone named Dr. Bronner uses hemp oil in cosmetics. Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap leads me to another attention grabber about hemp. You see Dr. Bronner is American and imports his hemp oil from Canada because Americans still can't grow hemp legally. Heh, heh... you knew that crazy cousin was good for something eh? We can tie up all the markets before our neighbours even think about it! Perhaps that's why there is a new processing plant coming for Alberta.