

Web makes it easy to grow, sell pot

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The world of marijuana trafficking once existed mostly in shady places where the right dealers hung out, or in exotic locales such as Amsterdam. But technology, which has revolutionized almost every other aspect of our world, has changed that.

Now, a simple search on an Internet search engine reveals a universe of online pot, including hundreds of Web sites offering to sell marijuana and paraphernalia such as bongs and marijuana seeds as well as free, detailed directions for growing marijuana.

The number of marijuana growers the Internet has instructed or how much marijuana changes hands online each year is unknown. But experts agree that the Internet has become the world's biggest head shop and that stemming that digital tide will be difficult for governments.

Drug users "can obtain whatever they want," on the Internet, "with more ease than in the conventional illicit street market," said the International Narcotics Control Board, an arm of the United Nations, in an April news release. The board said serious steps must be taken if governments hope to control the Web-based drug trade.

Allen St. Pierre, the director of the pro-legalization group National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, said there were at least 200 to 400 varieties of marijuana seeds available online, specially bred for every type of growing condition in North America.

Marijuana seeds' lack of odor and small size make them hard to detect in the mail, St. Pierre said.

Interstate marijuana trafficking carries a penalty of up to five years in jail and a possible \$250,000 fine for first offenders, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Easier for teens to acquire

Never before has so much drug culture been so readily available, especially to the estimated 21 million American teens using the Internet.

Marijuana use among 12th-graders has fallen 4 percentage points within the past year from its recent peak in 1997, but 34.3% of 12th-graders said in 2004 that they'd used the drug within the last year, according to Monitoring the Future, an annual survey of drug use. The survey is funded by a research grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, part of the National Institutes of Health.

Marijuana Web sites are particularly dangerous because parents don't realize their danger, said Tom Riley, a spokesman for the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy. "Even parents who do realize that marijuana is a serious problem still think ... their teens are going to be exposed to marijuana from a shady character in the street -- not on the computer, possibly sitting a few feet away from them," he said. "It's a serious problem that this is on the Internet."

The DEA's hot line, 1-877-RxAbuse, part of the government's efforts to shut down illegal online pharmacies selling prescription drugs, also can be used to report marijuana Web sites, DEA spokesman Rusty Payne said.

BY ELY PORTILLO
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

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