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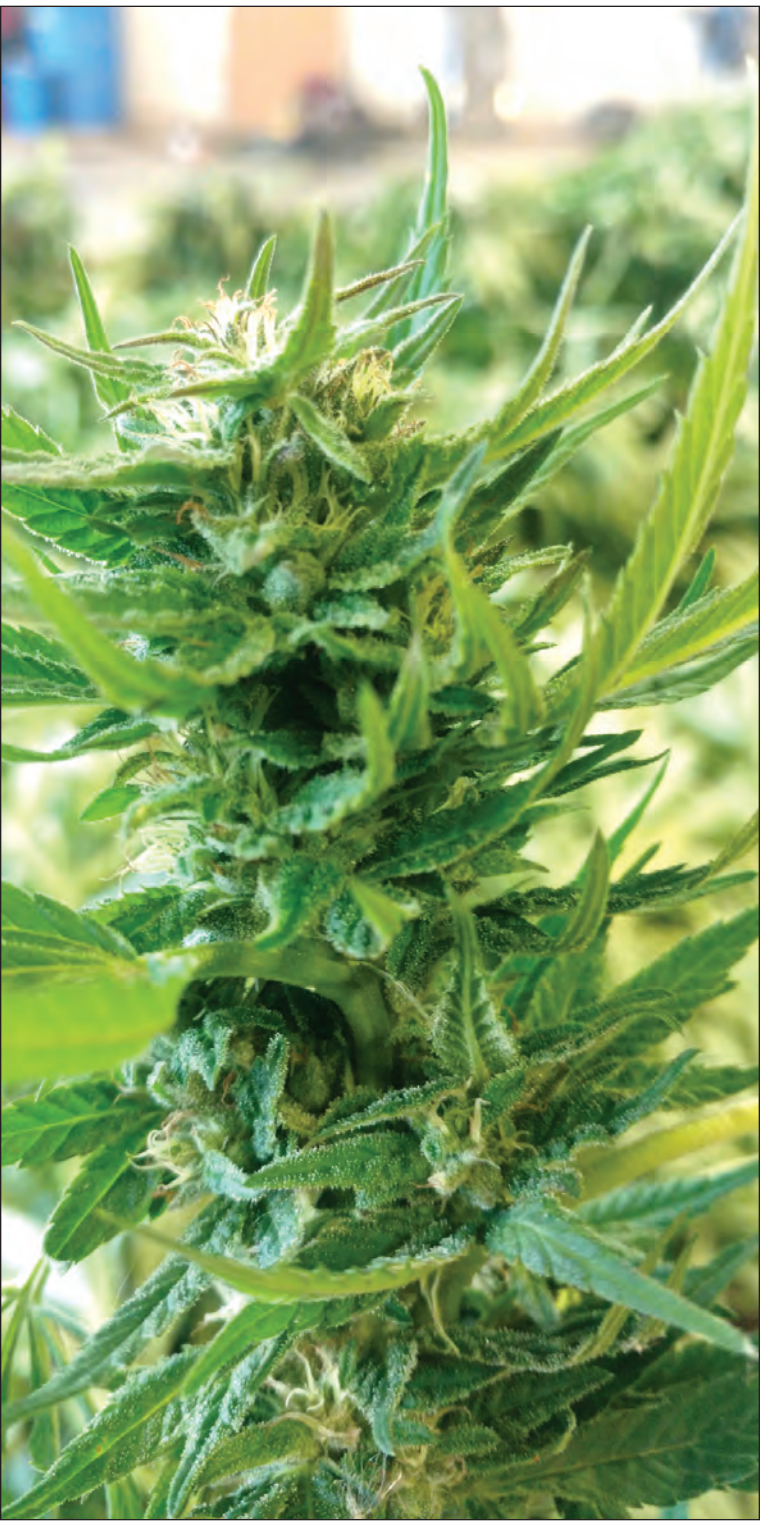
THE KERKHOVEN Banner

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This isn't your grandfather's crop

Nathan and Sean Collins see both demand and diversity in growing hemp



The compound CBD is found in the bud of the hemp plant. Above is such a plant, harvested in 2019 and dried, bucked and pelleted during the following winter and early spring. -- Photo submitted by Nathan Collins



Raising and processing hemp is a very hands-on ordeal. Nathan, left, and Sean are seen here chopping down the plants before they were taken in to dry for several months. Nathan compared growing hemp now as similar to growing corn in the 1940s - there is plenty of room for technological growth. -- Photo from the Botanical Animal website

by Jordan Almen

At the Collins Family Farm, south of Murdock, they aren't afraid to try new things. As brothers Nathan and Sean Collins saw the rising demand for CBD — cannabidiol, one of the chemical compounds found in cannabis — they saw an opportunity to not only diversify the revenue sources of their farm, but to create something that could be used to help others.

The Collinses started thinking about growing hemp — cannabis plants that contain no more than 0.3% THC, the psychoactive chemical that can give users a high — in the spring of 2018. "We just kept doing more and more research," said Nathan, "and in February 2019 Sean and I flew to Colorado and met with processors."

Nathan is very involved in the Farm Bureau, so he has been very aware of the work that has been done on legislation around hemp. They worked hard to make sure they had all of the right permits and that the endeavor would meet all of the legal requirements, including an incredibly thorough background check process. "It really blew my mind how in depth the state made the whole thing," Nathan reflected, "as a pilot program, they're trying to manage every aspect of it, but all legal and financial risks lie with the grower. We're 100% liable for everything. If a single plant test above the legal 0.03% THC, the entire field has to be destroyed." They also had to inform local law enforcement and the state about their plans, and give them the GPS location of the field so that the crop could be checked any time. As an ongoing precaution, the Collinses call law enforcement every couple of weeks to remind them of the crop and to report that they

haven't had any unusual activity. In March of 2019, after around a year of research, the Collinses began their first hemp crop.

"Originally, we started out with lights and racking in the shop, and we planted 45,000 of these little buggers," explained Nathan. The large expanse of racks were filled with trays, each containing 96 plants, and grow lights hung above each row. "In the process of them growing, they started to fall over and we discovered that you need to have wind on them so they become more rigid, so we had to re-transplant them."

Once the young plants got some more rigidity, the Collinses bought a transplanter, but soon had to adapt again. The root mass wouldn't stay together during the transplant, so instead two people hand planted the seedlings behind the transplanter. This process was used for the surviving 30,000 plants.

Thankfully, after this first run the Collinses were able set up their corn planter with special plates to fit the hemp seeds. After using this method, they actually found that they had a higher survival rate, so it was a win-win.

Crop care is another thing entirely. "Everything is done by hand," Nathan said. "There's nothing you can use on hemp at this point for weed control; we tried cover crops and that didn't work, so we mowed all of that down, but we have spent hours and hours hand-weeding 25 acres." They have now built a cultivator to go down the rows between the plants, but they still have to walk through the rows and hoe or pull the weeds from around the plants four or five times a season. "I figure by the end we've touched the plant one million times," he said with

a smirk.

The hemp fields are fertilized like those for corn, with manure from a local dairy for NPK - nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. "It's kind of a goofy plant," Nathan said. "You fertilize it like corn, but it grows like a soybean." It is day length determinant, meaning that as the sun is up less the plant finishes itself out. Unfortunately, if the plant experiences a stressful environment, it will undergo a change and produce pollen. Another challenge is that if the plant gets pollinated and goes to seed the CBD content goes to virtually zero.

For the Collinses' first hemp harvest, they dealt with the plants coming ready at the same time as their regular

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A bag of pellets used to help horses suffering from joint pain and inflammation. This is a one-month supply. -- Photo submitted by Nathan Collins

Kerkhoven EDA members elect officers, look at 2019 gains during annual meeting

by Jordan Almen

The Kerkhoven EDA held their annual meeting Monday night. The board voted to keep the officers the same — President: Eric Rudningen, Vice President: Scott Lamecker, Secretary: Kordell Van Heuveln, Treasurer: Nikki Ilgen, Assistant Treasurer: Mary Lee Moore. "Start thinking about next year, because we could rotate this thing around," said Rudningen.

Rudningen then presented the President's report: "As I look back on the past year, I can point out some very positive gains in economic development for the citizens of Kerkhoven. Our "jump start

Kerkhoven" program selected Windy's Wellness, Inc. as its winner. Windy's Wellness officially opened on December 1, 2019, and despite being shut down for three months it has continued to grow and expand, offering more options to its members.

"Mi Rancho Viejo opened its doors in the midst of the pandemic, first for take out only, and now for in-person dining. Main street Kerkhoven is looking very vibrant.

"Our comprehensive plan is now complete and we are ready to start using it to guide our community decisions for the future. Many long hours of discussion and contemplation have been put in to this plan.

I am hopeful that the citizens of Kerkhoven will be able to lean on this document, change things when necessary, and utilize it to keep our community moving forward.

"Some of the challenges that we continue to face include the empty nursing home property, continued lack of market rate housing, and an uncertain future related to the Gra-Mar apartment building.

"Of course I cannot talk about our current state of affairs without mentioning the challenge of Covid-19. This global pandemic will continue to give us new challenges as we learn more about the virus, how it affects people, what if any long term effects there

are, and where to place it on our risk continuum. We must find a way to rise above the false information, and political gamesmanship that dominate the discussions around this virus. When we are able to calmly look through the data driven facts, we will be able to make decisions that benefit our community in all aspects of our wellbeing.

"It has been an honor to serve with you all on this board for the past year. I look forward to continuing to do our best to provide opportunities to the people of Kerkhoven and the surrounding area.

"Thank you, Eric." Rudningen also added a few comments to his prepared

remarks. He noted that going down main street is dramatically different from six years ago, when there were several significant vacancies. He also noted that the Gra-Mar Apartment building will likely be bought by the RDA, pending some actions required at the county level.

"One of the things that's fun for me," Rudningen said, "is during the first years I was on the county board, Gary Hendrix would come with all the things happening in Appleton, and people would ask me about Kerkhoven and my response would be that I had another baby." He laughed and pointed out that lately he has had a lot of positive updates to

give about the town.

City clerk Kim Harkema then gave the report for the assistant treasurer. The main items on the report were the income from rent at the EDA-owned apartment building and the loan payment to Financial Security Bank for that apartment. The last year had some necessary repairs and some snow removal fees, and Harkema noted that the building is now about 20 years old and the board should anticipate the need to replace windows, landscaping and gutters. When asked, she said the gutters weren't replaced when the roof was done because they were in good condition then.

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