

# Whistler pot producer aims to be Canada's first organic grower (with video)

'Best buds' of B.C. company hope to gain official certification

BY TIFFANY CRAWFORD, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 10, 2014



Jesse McConnell, co-founder of Whistler Medicinal Marijuana Co. - an organic marijuana production facility - is trimming leaves in the nursery room.

**Photograph by:** MARK YUEN/VANCOUVER SUN

VANCOUVER — Tending to one of their organically grown marijuana plants, a towering mother affectionately named Kelly, a group of buddies who operate the Whistler Medical Marijuana Co. laugh when asked how they get a high yield without using pesticides or hydroponics.

It's magic, they say.

The owners don't want to give away their trade secrets, as they are likely soon to be Canada's only legal supplier of organic cannabis under the new federal licensing system that came into effect April 1. There are very few competitors in the organic market, given how difficult it is to use this method to grow pot.

The company is awaiting certification from the Fraser Valley Organic Producers Association, and owners are confident they'll have that ticket by summer, potentially making it the first commercial organic medical pot producer in the world.

"We are making some of the healthiest medicine in the world, free of pesticides. That's something to be proud of," says

owner Chris Pelz, as he took The Vancouver Sun on a tour of the production warehouses in Whistler. "I feel proud about the fact that Canadians now have a choice in their own health care."

Pelz, co-founder Jesse McConnell and organic consultant Peter Doig, owner of Kind House Organic Systems, love their work, evident in the way they inspect every leaf, scan for bugs and adjust lighting to make the plants more "comfortable."

Whistler Medical Marijuana is one of 12 medical marijuana producers authorized by Health Canada across the country. There are three others in B.C.: Canna Farms, which lists a Maple Ridge post office box, In the Zone Produce in the Okanagan and Thunderbird Biomedical on Vancouver Island. There are between 100 and 200 more that have applied provincewide, according to Health Canada.

As we entered the building, there was a surprising absence of that intense skunky odour typically associated with weed. Also noticeably absent were shelves lined with chemical fertilizers.

This is not a nine-to-five job. The partners work all hours to ensure there are no bugs destroying their plants, and unlike other commercial operations, about a third of their day is spent cleaning, says Pelz. They scrub everything to maintain a sterile environment, without using chemical cleaners.

To grow an organic product takes time, patience and a solid scientific method, says Doig, an agrologist and expert in growing organic vegetables. Doig is helping the company grow various strains of cannabis using certified organic inputs and using his company's secret integrated pest management system.

Growing pot may be an arduous job, but apparently, it's also a lot of fun. Cookie Monster, Kate Hudson, Baby Face — these are just some of the quirky names the owners have given their plants. Kelly, for example, is named after a silly song that actor Woody Harrelson (conversely, an outspoken advocate of legalizing marijuana) sang to his girlfriend in the television series Cheers.

"Kelly, Kelly, Kelly, Kelly, K-E-L-L-Y ..." the trio sings, laughing.

Sipping green smoothies, made by Pelz's wife, who owns an organic grocery store across the street called Olive's market, the three friends speak rapidly and with enthusiasm, each keen to share their expertise.

Pelz says with his wife running an organic store, and given the eco-conscious culture of Whistler, going green was a no-brainer. And it helps that since they got their licence on Feb. 27, they've had support from Whistler's mayor, the fire chief and the community, says Pelz.

"This community attracts people that are looking for an alternative to the mainstream ... people here don't eat burgers and fries every day. They want organic food, so it's not surprising that people would want their medicine to be clean," says Pelz, a former Intrawest employee who also has worked in real estate.

In the room where they grow the baby clones, Pelz explains how the mother plants will only be cloned once during production. This, he says, will produce a higher level of cannabinoids — a family of natural chemicals found in marijuana to have medicinal properties. Cannabinoids are now used for a number of illnesses ranging from cancer to arthritis and migraines.

Although their backgrounds differ, the friends share a firm belief in the healing properties of the product they are growing. Pelz says they routinely get calls from people saying that marijuana helped get them off prescription painkillers such as OxyContin.

The friends don't just work together, but also ski and mountain bike together.

"We're best buds," says McConnell, chuckling at the pun. Without divulging specifics, McConnell explains that he has more than a decade of experience growing pot in B.C., mostly under the old medical marijuana system.

Adds Pelz: "It's a bit like, 'How could someone distil alcohol suddenly two weeks after prohibition?' Well, it's the same here. There were people who were doing it and they had the expertise."

After dressing in white suits to protect the plants from any bugs we might have brought from pet hair, and feeling a bit like that scene in ET when they capture the alien, we enter the bright, orange-lit production room. Specialized glasses protect our eyes from the glaring HSP light.

The trio step through a foot bath on their way in. They don't need to wear the white scrubs we're decked out in because they change into sterilized clothes when they get to work.

On the production floor, hundreds of lush green plants packed in rows nearly touch the ceiling. They smell fresh, like spring flowers, as the buds are small and won't be ready for another three weeks.

Yet while the plants appear to be flourishing, McConnell admits they are not as healthy as they could be.

They sat in small pots for too long while the company waited to have its license approved, says McConnell. "There have, literally, been some growing pains." Though Doig adds: "But I love how big these buds are getting, they didn't look this good last week."

So, do they smoke it? To this, Pelz will only say they have two staff members licensed to possess.

Although a small "family" business now, Pelz has already started expanding into the two neighbouring warehouses and expects to grow to 3,000 customers by the end of the summer. Since they started selling in March, they've been averaging 30 new clients a week. The group offers four different strains — blue dream, pink kush, white widow and Afghan bull rider — with plans to expand to 20 strains in the near future. Most doctors don't yet recommend a certain strain to patients for certain ailments, but Pelz predicts that's coming.

"It's part of the evolution. Physicians are starting to attend cannabinoid clinics and so we have doctors training doctors; really, that's the next big wave."

Each strain costs the same at \$10 per gram including shipping. As for company profit margins, Pelz says every penny right now is going into expanding the business and paying off debt.

Pelz says the four strains all have healing properties for post-traumatic stress disorders, cancer (increasing appetite and pain relief), anxiety, sleeping problems and arthritis. According to [medicalmarijuanastrains.com](http://medicalmarijuanastrains.com), white widow gives the user euphoria and a clear mind, while pink kush is a more mellow, sleepy stone. Blue dream makes one jolly and is apparently good for migraines.

Back on the production floor, Pelz explains how they will bring in more staff to help dry and trim the weed when the next batch is ready in a few weeks. Once the marijuana hangs for four days it is transferred to drying racks for seven to 12 days.

"The slower the dry, the better," he says.

The dried weed is stored in an enormous vault which can hold up to 125 kilograms, with room to expand, where staff measure and document to the gram per Health Canada regulations. There's no room for pot to go missing or "spill" on floor.

Once it is weighed and packaged, the product is shipped to the consumer via a traceable and bonded carrier, says Pelz.

Nothing is shipped unless they have the original copy of the federal papers signed by a licensed physician that the company has called to verify is legit. Pelz says they are strictly following the rules, even down to not recommending certain physicians to potential clients, which is something they are not allowed to do, or advise them on how to buy derivatives like oils, tinctures and balms — also something they are not allowed to sell. Although he won't get into

specifics about the organic production, citing trade secrets, Doig, otherwise known as Captain, says they've come up with a way to get 100-per-cent crop yield.

"The conventional method of production is to spray chemical pesticides in a preventive manner and sometimes as a reaction to a pest," he says. "But here we use integrative pest-management system."

The system uses three lines of defence: soil, aggressive hygiene and what Doig lightheartedly calls "happy bugs."

"Our final line of defence is biological controls. So we have inoculated the soil with beneficial fungi that keep plant pathogens out and we use certain predators and beneficial insects to keep any pests away from the crop," he says.

Doig's methods are based on more than 15 years of production, growing organic cucumbers and tomatoes, using certified organic fertilizers. His philosophy is to be in harmony with nature, the idea that growing at a slower pace will yield a more nutritious product.

"We've used the same practices here in Whistler that we would use on a 20-acre green house facility," he said. "The end product has enhanced nutrition, medicinal properties and flavour. By not using pesticides you're not leaving a residue. That's the ideal. You want those profound end products."

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[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



Chris Pelz, founder of Whistler Medicinal Marijuana Co. - an organic marijuana production facility - and his team posing for a photograph in the production room.

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