Legal Hemp Is Being Planted at George Washington's Historic Estate for the First Time in 200 Years

Our nation's first president was also the first and most famous advocate of hemp.

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George Washington has been a hero of the cannabis movement ever since he famously told his gardener to "Make the most of the Indian hemp seed, sow it everywhere." But, ironically, that seed has not been sown at Washington's home at Mount Vernon since the man himself planted it.

Until 2018, that is.

Last year, thanks to changing laws regarding marijuana's non-psychotropic cousin, the workers at Mount Vernon planted and harvested a small plot of hemp on the same land that the first president used to grow the plant two centuries ago.

"It's been tremendously exciting to bring back a crop that hasn't been grown since Washington's day," says Dean Norton, the estate's current head gardener, or director of horticulture, as he is known today. "That's kind of our mission, trying to represent this site as it was during his time."

And while the plot at Mount Vernon is tiny – only about 1,000 square feet – it represents not just the past as it was in the time of our first president, but the future in a state looking for a new agricultural lifeline.

"There's a real need for that crop, which is why to me it was so important to bring something back to the soil at Mount Vernon that had been grown by Washington in the 18th century that hadn't seen the soil here at Mount Vernon since his time," Norton says, adding that Mount Vernon has a "special" role in potentially convincing the legislature to legalize hemp production.

"Washington's use of it was strictly for fiber. There's no reference anywhere for anything other than that," he says. "But I think it can become an amazing commercial crop for the state of Virginia."

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A Farmer First

Though he is rightfully remembered as a great military strategist, one of our Founding Fathers and the country's

first president, Washington was a farmer first. In fact, he walked away from the presidency after two terms so he could go back to his beloved Mount Vernon and work the soil. In a letter to a friend, he once wrote “agriculture has ever been amongst the most favorite amusements of my life.”

“George Washington considered himself foremost a farmer,” Norton says. “I like to say his love was of nature, his gift was leadership, but his passion was farming.”

Washington began his agriculture career as a tobacco farmer, but in the 1760s he was looking for a new cash crop and first explored the possibility of hemp. According to Norton, at that time England was offering “bounties and subsidies and bonuses” for people who knew how to grow hemp because the plant’s fiber was so important to the country’s navy and shipping industry.

Ultimately, Washington went with wheat as his primary crop, building a grist mill that still stands today, but he kept a large plot of hemp planted at Mount Vernon for his own purposes, including a fishing fleet that one year accounted for two-thirds of his income, according to Norton.

“The hemp they grew here and the fiber they made would help repair the seines [nets] and of course he needed the ropes for his fishing fleet,” Norton says.

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Traditional Measures

Mount Vernon’s current plot is a far cry from what Washington would have needed to keep his fishing fleet in rope. But it is also far from the industrial hemp we think of today. The tiny plot at Mount Vernon is purely for demonstration, especially since all of the farming, harvesting and production is being done as it would have during the Colonial era.

“We’re growing it, we’re harvesting it, we’re putting it into

shocks, we're drying it, we're going to ret it, we're going to break it; the whole thing," Norton says. "The people are in costumes whenever we do anything down there."

But that doesn't mean it didn't face the same kinds of challenges that other hemp farmers face. For example, last year Mount Vernon's seed was quarantined in New York for longer than expected, meaning it did not get to Norton until May, a little later than hoped. Then, after it was sown, Virginia experienced three storms that dropped more than three inches of rain on the fields, washing away or rotting out much of the seed and forcing Norton and his team to replant.

"So it had a rough start," he says with a laugh.

But by the time the Aug. 31 harvest came around, the plants had grown to nearly eight feet, about what Norton says they hoped for.

"It really is an amazing plant," he says.

Norton says the year has been an educational experience for him. Despite being a professional horticulturist who has worked at the Mount Vernon since he began picking up trash at the estate as a teenager in 1969, this was his first experience with *Cannabis sativa L*. Norton says one of the things he has learned is how laborious the process was back in the 18th century, from the planting to the harvest, but especially the processing. It has given him a new appreciation of the skills the plantation workers and slaves possessed. But the small patch at Mount Vernon will not produce a lot of fiber. According to Norton, you need six acres of hemp to get just one acre of fiber, making the 1,000-square-foot plot truly for demonstration only.

"What's fun about the 18th century is that when you do something you've only read about for the first time, it's just this whole new world," he says. "You really don't know until

you actually go through the process.”

Norton says the plot also proved extremely popular with local wildlife, even more than the other crops that are planted at the estate.

“When I am out at the flower garden here at Mount Vernon, the Pleasure Garden, I rarely see a honey bee,” he says. “But this hemp crop during the flowering, it was like this buzz you could hear 50 feet away, there were so many of them.

“Then, when they left and the seed are coming, the birds flew in,” he adds. “It was like the Hitchcock movie.”

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Agriculture as an Attraction

Norton says the response to the planting has been overwhelmingly positive, from media coverage to the tourists who “do a double take” when they walk by the patch and often stop to pose for photos with the crop.

He is already planning to plant additional hemp this year, taking the first president’s advice to make the most of the seed and expanding the plant’s footprint at the estate.

“Oh yeah; it will become a regular crop down there for sure,” he says, adding that it will be planted in the “Sundries Field,” along with corn, flax, cotton and tobacco.

Norton says it’s all part of the mission of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, which owns the former president’s estate and teaches people about life in the 18th century and about the farming that Washington treasured.

“You know, agriculture is agriculture,” he says. “Whether it’s hemp or cotton or flowers, we can all learn from the practices we do.”

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