

A Trimmer’s Notes

By Artemis Oscar

How many people who obtain perfectly manicured buds from a dispensary consider the steps involved in its preparation? They may give some thought to the role of the grower, but who thinks about the trim crew?

People come from all over the world to trim cannabis during the harvest season in California. Between early October and mid-November they swell the population of Mendocino, Humboldt, and other counties. Many others work on indoor grows year round, all over the state.

There are young adults —high school drop-outs and college graduates— looking for work. There are local moms clipping to help pay the bills. There are Mexican families who come every year from down south. Trimmers come from all walks of life. You find yourself taking part in interesting conversations —a good fringe benefit.

Cultivators generally want workers they are acquainted with, who have trimmed before, and are trustworthy. Training someone new takes time, and the novices tend to work slowly at first.

The amenities of a trim job for an outdoor harvest are varied. Sometimes the trimming is done deep in the woods. A person will be sleeping in a tent with an outdoor toilet. Other times there are more plush accommodations, with guest houses, electricity and plumbing. Growers generally pay for the trimmers’ food and caffeine. They want a productive workforce.

A trimmer will usually be tight-lipped about the details of their employment. In October, my friends simply know that I am “up north.”

During the last month or so of a plant’s development, growers remove the big “fan leaves” as they begin turning yellow. This exposes the lower buds to the sunlight.

When the grower decides plants are ready to harvest —usually when the white hairs on the buds are turning red— they are cut down and either branches are lopped off to be trimmed immediately, or the whole plant is hung upside-down to dry in a cool, dark space for a week or so of curing.

As the plant dries, the remaining leaves wrap themselves around the buds and cling to the resinous trichomes. It is the trimmer’s job to cut these small leaves away with a small, sharp scissors —exposing the flowering top, which is covered with the beautiful crystals we know and love.

Strains are trimmed in different ways, depending on the structure of the colas and the intentions of the grower. For example, the Afgooey strain is very leafy, but the leaves are generally covered in crystals. If the product is intended for the medical market, the trimming technique needs to be altered to keep some of the larger, crystallized leaves.

The idea is to retain as much of the flower as possible. “Mowing” the weed makes trimming faster but is wasteful because it cuts off trichome-rich parts of the flower. Mowing also makes the buds look too uniform.

Wet and Dry Trimming

There are two methods of trimming: wet and dry. When you trim dried flowers, you are generally paid by the weight of finished product. The going rate in the fall of 2010 was \$200 per pound.

A few years ago, when growers could sell a pound of manicured, high-grade sinsemilla for \$4,000, trimmers were typically paid \$250/lb. or more. Our labor was in such high demand that growers hired caterers and massage therapists to enhance the working conditions.

Increased cannabis cultivation in recent years has cut the wholesale price of pounds sold in California by about 50 percent, and most growers cite this as grounds for cutting the wages of trimmers.

When you do a dry trim, workers are given either a small branch with buds or individual buds to snip. Usually the first step is to “buck” the plant. This means cutting off the buds from the larger stalk and separating the small fluffy buds from the larger, denser ones.

Next the larger buds get what some call a “haircut.” The leaves are trimmed off to



shape the bud and reveal the flower. The portion of the leaf that connects to the stem, the petiole, also needs to be clipped off. Some people call these “crow’s feet” or “crow’s toes,” because of their W-shape. The last step is to cut the stem of the finished nug as small as possible. If you cut it too close, a budlet may break off and you have to reshape the bud.

The finished product is placed in an unsealed turkey-roasting bag to be cured.

A wet trim will pay you by the hour. The going rate in 2010 was \$20/hour. The process starts as soon as the grower cuts down their plants. The cannabis is brought to the trimmers still on the main branches. Workers trim the buds right while it is still on the branch. You need not cut the leaves as close as you would in a dry trim because they will shrink when they dry. The finished flowers are then dried, hung up (still on the branch), or on screens that allow air to circulate around them. When dry, leaves that were missed in the first go-around are clipped off.

Cannabis grown outdoors usually get dry-trimmed and indoor plants wet-trimmed. It’s up to the growers. If they want to move their product as soon as possible, then they will do a wet trim.

One advantage of dry trimming is that the work can be rationed out over time. Growers can decide to trim part of their crop and save the rest to trim later (after they’ve generated some cash flow). Another advantage: dry-trimmed cannabis is ready to be used immediately.

Some say that a wet trim, because it involves less handling of the flowers, results in a better final product.

Wet trimming happens year round, and is generally done in an extremely busy couple of days. You sit for hours in a chair, scissors in hand, using the same repetitive motion. You are fed and provided caffeine to keep you going.

The last trim gig I had took two intense days. The grower who oversaw it had a room in the house, but never stayed there.

The two residents (who had done most of the work during the growing cycle) left each morning for professional jobs in the city, while 13 temps in their basement finished off 50 plants.

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A wet trim is advantageous for a worker who doesn’t go very fast because you are paid by the hour, not the amount you finish. Also, it appears that wet-trimming is less likely to trigger allergic reactions.

Last season, a friend and I were both coughing and wheezing during a dry trim, and we assumed we had caught the same “bug.” My friend, who was sleeping where the cannabis was drying, was more symptomatic. As soon as we left the job site, our symptoms disappeared.

Reactions like ours are not uncommon, and a serious, scientific study of “cannabis allergies” might yield some interesting results. According to activist/author Ed Rosenthal, “I have received hundreds of letters over the years from people who were experienced users and then developed an allergy. These include wheezing and choked throat, extreme eye dryness or tearing, panic attacks, headaches and sweating.”

The cult of the nug

In medical cannabis dispensaries, well-trimmed, seedless buds are the norm. But back in the mid-1960s, the herb smuggled into the United States from Mexico, Colombia, and Southeast Asia, was leafy and full of seeds. California sinsemilla, marketed in the late 1970s, was manicured, but not very meticulously. An old-timer of my acquaintance says, “Growers used to want to show off the size of their colas. The current emphasis on perfectly manicured ‘nugs’ is coming from the dispensaries. They call it ‘bag appeal.’”

Undoubtedly, trimming is now considered an essential part of the cannabis production process, and the snipped leaves and budlets are being put to good use making tinctures and edibles.

It is the growers (and the consumers) who bear the expense. Some profit-minded growers invest in \$15,000 mechanical trimmers so that they won’t have to pay a crew. These entrepreneurs may refer to cannabis as “the sacred herb,” but they really see it as just another commodity to be sold for maximum profit.

The website for a machine called “The Twister,” claims that it “will slash the number of workers you’ll need to harvest your crops while also dramatically reducing the overall time you spend harvesting. Fewer workers to manage over a shorter harvest time makes your job easier and less stressful, and saves you time and money —all without sacrificing quality.”

An East Bay chef compares the mechanical trimmers to Cuisinarts. “You can Cuisinart an onion,” she observes, “but it’ll never taste the same as an onion chopped with a knife. The machine heats the onion and releases some of the volatile flavor elements. If you want a really good *gespacho*, you do it with a knife, not a blender.”

The Workforce

As you would expect in any workforce, there is a wide spectrum of competence and commitment. Some people prefer to show up, do their work, get paid, and go home. They’re likely to be ripping through

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their second pound while others are shooting the breeze and going out to have another smoke break. Their focus is on making good money in a short amount of time, and growers tend to notice, appreciate, and re-hire them.

To others, cannabis means “party.” Trimming can be fun. You are essentially hanging out, chatting with people, listening to music, looking at beautiful buds, and sampling their effects. The free-lance nature of the work enables people to pursue other interests.

Working a trim job will send you to some odd locations. “The strangest trimming experience I had,” says Mamiya, 24, was going to a house in Oakland to wet trim for two days. I walked into the house and took a deep breath in anticipation of smelling that lovely skunky smell... Strangely, it wasn’t present.”

She was led “to this little hole in the floor no bigger than the size of a bed pillow. A whoosh of odor crept up from the floor boards. He ushered me down into the pit I thought I would never return from. I found unstable footing on some lopsided sand bags and managed to find my footing on the ground. I stood up only to find my head touching the ceiling.

“As I looked around, I saw about 15 people crouched down trimming stalks of herb perched on sand bags. I later found out that the many sand bags which were being used as seats, stairs, backrests, and tables had been filled with hand-dug dirt from that very basement to create three large grow rooms.

In that environment she trimmed for 21 hours in two days.

Unless one has a longstanding relationship with established growers, trimming work may be inconsistent. One might be employed for many days consecutively, then there might be nothing going on for weeks. Ideally, you get paid for the work you do at the end of each day. However, I have experienced lags in payment, and once I was paid with counterfeit bills.

Trimming for an entire outdoor season or even a lengthy indoor job can leave you burnt out. I sometimes think, “I don’t want to look at trimming scissors or plastic trash bags ever again.” You get very zoned out, looking at the bud for hours. Your eyes close and you can still see the green, crystalline leaves. You sit working for as long as you can tolerate it. If you get distracted and get up, you are losing precious time that you could be working. Trimmers sometimes won’t get up to eat because they are “in the zone.”

Another downside is the air of paranoia, which varies depending on where you are working and how much “weight” is on the premises. Even if you are employed by a grower associated with a medical dispensary, even if there is paperwork confirming that the cannabis is intended for bona fide patients, there is always the chance of getting busted.

It is said that trimmers often get off easily when an operation is discovered by law enforcement. However, being raided at gunpoint and detained —even if you are then released— is not something one wants to go through. What database would your name show up on in the future?

Trimming is now an essential component of the cannabis industry. The work we do may be taken for granted, but it shouldn’t be. Next time you find yourself in possession of some beautiful, glistening cannabis flowers, thank the provider, thank the cultivator... and thank the trimmer.