

West Marin medical marijuana grower resurfaces with water conservation tips

Water-saving tips among his ideas

[By Richard Halstead](#)

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After keeping a low profile for more than two years, George Bianchini, founder and CEO of Medi-Cone, a Marin-based collective that grows and sells medical marijuana, invited the public to visit his West Marin home this week for a demonstration on water conservation.

Bianchini said he wants to teach people growing medical marijuana how to do so without wasting water and poisoning trees with fertilizers.

Bianchini, who operated Broadway Video in Fairfax for 27 years, started Medi-Cone in 2008. At that time, the collective employed a dozen people, all members of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 5, in the cultivation, harvesting and packaging of medical marijuana for several Bay Area dispensaries. But in December 2011, Bianchini announced he was shutting down Medi-Cone.

"We had to go back underground several years ago after the Richard Lee bust," Bianchini said Wednesday. "We had rented one of their buildings. Our address was on the search warrant. We were never investigated by the DEA, but we were very concerned that we could have got caught up in it."

Lee is the founder of Oaksterdam University in Oakland, a sort of trade school for the medical marijuana industry.

Bianchini said Medi-Cone, which now employs 25 people in Oakland and six in Los Angeles, continues to sell its premier product the "Medi-Cone," a cone-shaped cigarette containing about a gram of marijuana, at about 25 medical marijuana dispensaries.



A small marijuana plant is pulled from its water bath to display the wet roots on George Bianchini's garden in San Geronimo.

Bianchini said, however, that his focus has changed. He is now collaborating with Ed Rosenthal, a horticulturist and publisher of books about marijuana cultivation. Bianchini said he and Rosenthal are attempting to develop new marijuana hybrids that contain lower levels of tetrahydrocannabinol or THC, which produce its psychoactive effects and higher levels of cannabidiol or CBD, which users believe produce many of marijuana's medical benefits. In August, Bianchini's new AC/DC strain won a first-place award at San Francisco's Hempcan for the best CBD product. The strain has 1.2 percent THC and 18.54 percent CBD. "You could smoke it all day long and not get high," Bianchini said, "but it has all of the medicinal qualities."

These days nearly all of the marijuana grown at his home — in two indoor grow rooms and a small outdoor plot — are CBD strains, with virtually no street value since they wouldn't produce the typical pot high.

"We consider this our lab," Bianchini said. "This is where I do the experimenting and breeding. Not being a scientist, what we do is put mother plant and father plant together and then we test the results."

A small marijuana plant is pulled from its water bath to display the wet roots on George Bianchini's garden in San Geronimo. The system sprays water around the roots and minimizes water waste due to evaporation. He raises vegetables as well as a sizable crop of marijuana. Medical marijuana patients, such as Yvonne Westbrook White of San Pablo, sample the new hybrids and give Bianchini and Rosenthal feedback.

Bianchini said, "Yvonne is our sounding board for how things make her feel."

White, 61, said she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when she was in her mid-20s. She said marijuana works much better than the pharmaceuticals that her doctors initially prescribed for spasms in her legs.

"When I don't have it, my legs jump all over the place," said White, who uses a wheelchair. "A couple of puffs, and I'm good to go."

The marijuana that is used to produce the Medi-Cone cigarette has more typical levels of THC. That marijuana, however, isn't grown at Bianchini's home. Bianchini said he contracts with other small medical marijuana growers for that material. One of those growers, who identified himself only as Mike, attended Bianchini's open house on Wednesday.

"We do a very good job of it too," Mike said, "thanks to George giving us all the premium plants. He knows what he is doing."

It's growers like Mike that Bianchini is trying to reach with his newest project: a demonstration water conservation project. Bianchini is growing pots and pots of vegetables — peppers, cucumbers, eggplant, corn, and lettuce — using a technique known as "wicking," which dates back to the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

The basic principle of the technique revolves around using rope to convey water from a reservoir placed beneath a vessel containing a plant. The rope is fed through the bottom of the container and water travels up it through a scientific principle known as capillary action. The plant's roots nurse off the rope, drawing off just the amount of water they need.

He said the wicking system reduces run-off and the spread of fertilizer that might otherwise poison nearby vegetation in outdoor gardens.

Bianchini said he feels as though he is on solid ground these days, despite the crackdown on medical marijuana dispensaries by Melinda Haag, the San Francisco-based U.S. attorney for the Northern District of California, several years ago.

"I feel fairly confident that if I obey California's rules and act responsibly that I should be safe," he said.

Bianchini said even though he was recently offered \$9.6 million to sell Medi-Cone, he is not making any money from running the collective, which operates as a not-for-profit corporation. On the contrary, Bianchini says he has invested \$1 million of his own money, which he earned with his video rental business.

He added, however, that when legalization comes, "and that could be in 2016," then it will be "entirely responsible to make money on it."