

When my wife Rita rides with me she often says, “Quit gawking around and pay closer attention to the road!” I must admit, I do have a tendency to check out my surroundings perhaps more than I should when I am cruising the two lanes. Of late, one thing I have readily noticed is the sudden emergence of autumn colors along the roadside ditches. With each passing day, more contrasting colors appear. Currently, the yellow-gold colors of sunflowers and golden rod are in full blaze. At the same time, a subdued mauve blush is surfacing on many of our native grasses such as bluestem and purple love grass. Other weeds are turning a tannish-brown as they mature.



I have also observed that one particular weed stands out in dramatic contrast to all of its surrounding neighbors. It contrasts significantly in size, in color and in shape. The weed is extremely tall in relation to the other weeds, six to seven feet. It has a dark, emerald-green color, and it grows in a conical shape, like the shape of a Christmas tree. The weed is hemp. For many Nebraskans, it is known as *Nebraska Ditch Weed* and for some, *Nebraska No High* due to its association with marijuana.

Hemp belongs to the genus *Cannabis*. The genus *Cannabis* has three distinct species: *Cannabis sativa*, *Cannabis indica*, and *Cannabis ruderalis*. Within the entire genus, a unique class of molecules is produced known as cannabinoids—deemed narcotic. Herein lies the controversy. Having such a weed in one’s possession is a violation of the law. However, since it has such an interesting history and perhaps an even more interesting future, I thought it worthy to write about.

Based on the research I conducted, humans have been using hemp for thousands of years. One of the oldest artifacts ever found on earth is a piece of fabric made from hemp. Allegedly, the Declaration of Independence was drafted on hemp paper. I have a book in my office titled *Weeds of Nebraska and the Great Plains* that was published by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. According to this book, hemp was first introduced in Nebraska, near Fremont, in 1889 for the production of hemp fiber. In 1937, the U.S. Congress passed the Marijuana Tax Act which criminalized growing hemp; however, hemp production was encouraged by the U.S. government during World War II. Exceptions and rewards were given to farmers who grew hemp. The hemp was used in the making of parachutes, rope, webbing, clothes and lotions.



Today, hemp grows naturally throughout Nebraska in pastures, roadside ditches and waste areas. Hemp is of no value to livestock although its seeds serve as an important food for pheasants, quail and mourning doves. The plant is dioecious, meaning there are both male and female plants. At maturity, seeds are borne near the tops of female plants. The terminal portions of the female plants contain the largest quantity of the narcotic material tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Nebraska's hemp belongs to the genus/species *Cannabis sativa*, claimed to be the industrial crop of hemp and grown for fiber. This weed has a low level of THC. Research indicates this species is incapable of producing a marijuana high; perhaps that might be why the weed is coined *Nebraska No High*. Although considered an agriculture crop, it remains illegal if cultivated in Nebraska. In the last decade or so, much has been legislated throughout the United States regarding the growing and use of *Cannabis*. In many states, it is now legal to grow and purchase hemp for medical and/or recreational use.



Currently, Nebraska does not allow for the purchase or sale of any type of *Cannabis*. However, of late there has been serious discussion within the Nebraska legislature to legalize the growing of industrial hemp. The role of *Cannabis* and its future legality in the state of Nebraska remains questionable.

In the meantime, I will continue to 'gawk around' as I drive while at the same time paying closer attention to the road. Even then, I am certain I will continue noticing the many different weeds growing naturally in our roadside ditches, including the contrasting, yet controversial *Cannabis sativa*— commonly known as hemp.