

# Jamaica: a scientist in search of lost ganja

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Dr Machel Emanuel inspects cannabis plant in a greenhouse at the University of the West Indies

A supreme ganja, smoked by Rastas and even Bob Marley himself in the 1970s? This pipe dream of every self-respecting ganja aficionado is becoming reality again thanks to the horticultural talents of a scientist in

Jamaica.

Amid mangos, lychees and other jackfruit, Dr Machel Emanuel has planted a field of cannabis plants measuring dozens of square meters—cannabis cultivated in the open, in greenhouses or in his lab in the botanical garden of the Biology Department at the University of the West Indies in Kingston.

His specialty: landrace cannabis, which grew naturally in Jamaica before it disappeared as a result of human intervention.

"In the 50s, 60s, 70s, Jamaica was known for its landrace cultivar which definitely gave Jamaica that [international reputation](#)," the rasta doctor explained, dreadlocks hanging down his back.

The plant is adapted to its environment and with "unique growing characteristics based on its flower, on the smell, on the flavor, even on the euphoria" it delivers to those who consume it, he said.

Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailers—founding members of the celebrated reggae group The Wailers—used landrace cannabis, he assures, amid the soothing, tropical ambience of his little garden of Eden—or Jah, the Rastafarian word for God.



Dr Machel Emanuel and his landrace cannabis, which grew naturally in Jamaica before it disappeared as a result of human intervention

The reggae legends' ganja, he says, would not have been as strong as modern, artificially created cannabis, which has higher levels of THC—the plant's main psychoactive ingredient.

But in the 1980s, during the US war on drugs, landrace cannabis was easily spotted because of its height and destroyed, and cultivation of the plant was abandoned. Over time, easier-to-hide hybrids replaced the landrace cultivars.

## **Enter the doctor**

Enter Dr Emanuel. The 35-year-old from Dominique has grown cannabis since 2001, moving to Jamaica in 2007 to pursue his studies. His doctorate is in biology, with a specialty in horticulture and the adaptation of plants to climate.

A lover of ganja himself—which he doesn't smoke but rather consumes by means of vaporization or aromatherapy—Emanuel decided to recover the lost landrace varieties and reproduce them in his lab, where Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, considered a Messiah by Rastas, gazes out from photos on the walls.

The quest wasn't easy: grains of landrace had spread to the four corners of the Caribbean over the years. His search led him to Guadeloupe, Trinidad and Dominique, in pursuit of Rastas living in the countryside and still cultivating what is left of these plants.





Easier-to-hide hybrids gradually replaced the landrace cultivars

The good doctor recalls finding a Rasta man living on a mountain who "hadn't been really been in contact with the civilization in the last 40 years. It was a six hours hike to get to him." Emanuel returned with the precious seed.

## **A seductive pitch**

His research hasn't been just out of love for horticulture. The scientist has also developed an entire marketing plan for the landrace cultivar.

The marketing material refers to a "pure" and ancient herb, used by Bob Marley—a seductive pitch to cannabis lovers in countries and regions that have legalized its use, such as Canada and some US states.

"There is a nostalgia value that could be added based on marketing applications," Emanuel says. "Jamaica's reputation was basically built on these plants."

He suggests Jamaica take the lead in establishing a geographical indicator for its home-grown cannabis "just like Champagne in France."



Cannabis cultivated using aeroponics at the University of the West Indies  
Biology Department

Companies and individuals are already knocking on his door, drawn by the savory aroma of ganja, he says.

But the scientist is cautious, notably over [intellectual property rights](#).

"What kind of credits would there be for the university and for the farmers that have preserved those seeds?" he asks.

In line with his Rastafarian beliefs, Emanuel wants more equitable "fair trade" conditions for producers in developing countries.

"The consumer is willing to patronize products based on morals, ethics and a protocol in growing, organic or vegan," he says, highlighting the "natural connotations" of his product.

"There could be an economic advantage to growing these plants here," he says. "They are more resistant and grow more easily."

Summing up his pitch, Emanuel jokes: "You can't buy happiness, but you can buy weed."

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