



The terms “hemp” vs “marijuana” vs “cannabis”

There are hundreds of terms used to refer to the cannabis plant and its products. The most common terms you are likely to hear in North America are “hemp,” “marijuana,” and “cannabis.”

The 2018 Farm Bill helped to establish the “official” definition of hemp by limiting the delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol, or delta-9 THC content of hemp to no more than 0.3%. Hemp is generally used to create products such as paper, clothing, plastic, and food products. The earth-friendly nature and sustainability of hemp make it a popular alternative to many other crops. Hemp is naturally resistant to pests (meaning fewer pesticides and herbicides are used in the growing process), it is one of the few crops that is capable of carbon sequestration by capturing and storing carbon dioxide, it requires minimal irrigation, and hemp is ideal for sustainable crop rotation practices.¹

Additionally, hemp is considered a regenerative crop due to its ability to reverse the effects of chemical pollution and decarbonization to improve topsoil health and its ability to reduce soil erosion and loss.² Recently, constituents of hemp have been used to create delta-8, which is a popular intoxicant derived from hemp. [For more on delta-8 and its impact, click here.](#)

‘Marijuana’ (or marihuana) was used to describe raw, smoked cannabis in Mexico since the 1840s. Despite the fact that the term “cannabis” had appeared on labels and in medical preparations in pharmacies during that time, the term marijuana was also introduced. It began when U.S. newspapers published English-language versions of articles that were being printed in Mexico that sensationalized crimes committed by people who were high on marijuana. Unfortunately, even before its common use in the United States, the term had a bad reputation in Mexico because it was associated with “lower class” Mexicans such as prisoners and soldiers.³ Those same negative connotations carried over into the U.S. and became part of the messaging related to marijuana as the federal government switched from alcohol to cannabis prohibition. Today, some view the term as controversial or racist because of this history of use.

Cannabis Sativa L is the scientific name for the plant, from which marijuana is derived, and “cannabis” as a term is often used as an alternative to “marijuana.” When medical marijuana legalization was being considered in Illinois in 2013, this is the term that lawmakers used in the bill because lawmakers were often uncomfortable using the term marijuana and wanted to instead use the scientific name.⁴ Today, “cannabis” is the preferred term for most lawmakers and those in the industry. Recently-published rules by the Associated Press (long a standard for news stories) indicate that cannabis and marijuana can be used interchangeably.

However, a recent trend among reformers is to use the term “marijuana” to refer to cannabis with a high amount of delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol or delta-9 THC,⁵ “hemp” as cannabis with only trace amounts of delta-9 (consistent with the federal definition of hemp⁶), and “cannabis” is used to refer to all varieties. Unfortunately things may be confusing for a while as terminology settles.

¹ Rachel Garland, “15 Mind-Blowing Ways Hemp Can Impact the Planet,” Green Flower, July 19, 2020, <https://news.green-flower.com/15-mind-blowing-ways-hemp-can-heal-the-world>

² Amy Lynch, “The future of regenerative farming looks to hemp,” Feast and Field, January 21, 2022, https://feastandfield.net/read/herbs-and-spices/the-future-of-regenerative-farming-looks-to-hemp/article_208ce4d8-6e7a-11ec-96a7-9fe1a4095391.html

³ Mariah Woelfel, “Pot? Weed? Marijuana? What Should We Call It?,” NPR, September 19, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/local/309/2019/09/19/762044859/pot-weed-marijuana-what-should-we-call-it>

⁴ Woelfel, “Pot? Weed? Marijuana? What Should We Call It?”

⁵ Elizabeth Hartney, “What is THC?,” VeryWellMind, Last updated March 11, 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-thc-in-marijuana-4080556#:~:text=THC%20stands%20for%20delta%2D9,use%20marijuana%20to%20feel%20high.>

⁶ Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, H.R.2, 115th Cong. (2018).