

# NC A&T is Growing the Future of North Carolina's Hemp Industry

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David Straughan

October 22, 2020



Dr. Sanjun Gu is a horticulture specialist at North Carolina A&T University. Gu is an award-winning researcher and extension specialist. He has spent his career studying crops like strawberries and tomatoes and passing that knowledge on to others.

Now, he's one of the leaders of NC A&T's Industrial Hemp Task Force, which is looking to help farmers across the state grow cannabis.

## Building the Industrial Hemp Task Force

The Industrial Hemp Task Force runs through A&T's College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (CAES). The program formed after the state's Industrial Hemp Commission released temporary rules in 2017.

“The task force set up research and outreach guidelines with a goal to help small-scale producers interested in the crop,” said Gu. “The task force is led by our Agricultural Research Director, Dr. Shirley Hymon-Parker.”

Gu said that it was his background in horticulture that brought him to the program.





Image courtesy of David Straughan.

“As the only production specialist for horticulture at A&T, naturally I became the outreach specialist for hemp,” he said. “CBD hemp, which most farmers are interested in growing, are more or less regarded as a horticultural crop.”

The last hurdle for the team at A&T was securing financing. Due to regulations, A&T could not use federal or state funds for its hemp research before 2019. However, Gu and his team eventually found the money they needed to fund the program.

“[We] were able to secure funding, such as from the Gold LEAF Foundation,” he said. The Gold LEAF Foundation, based in Rocky Mount, works “to increase economic opportunity in North Carolina’s rural and tobacco-dependent communities.”

Gu explained that they received funding “to conduct applied research projects and outreach activities geared towards helping our small-scale hemp growers.”

### **How the NC A&T Industrial Hemp Task Force Works**

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“At A&T, we have two major components for industrial hemp: research and extension,” he said. “Research is focused on CBD hemp variety evaluations and soil fertility management for floral buds production, as well as on various other uses of hemp as a fiber and grain crop.”





Image courtesy of David Straughan.

Gu works on the extension side of the program.

“Extension is focused on educating our farmers and extension agents on hemp production, state and federal regulations,” he said.

Much of the extension team’s work also focuses on education about risk management. Gu says the task force keeps this aspect because “hemp is not guaranteed a profitable crop and definitely not for every farmer.”

Gu explained that the program involves both undergraduate and graduate students.

“Undergraduate students get to know the crop and regulations through classes and field visits,” he said. “Some graduate students are conducting hemp research. Research professors such as Dr. Arnab Bhowmik and myself conduct applied research projects that are in urgent need from our farmers.”

The extension team works to design and deliver outreach programs. These programs help farmers and county extension agents better understand the regulations, risks and economic potential of hemp.

“We have offered field days, workshops, conferences, and field demonstrations throughout North Carolina in the last two to three years,” said Gu. “We also have Dr. Guochen Yang who is one of the NC Industrial Hemp Commissioners. He represents A&T and has put forward suggestions for the benefits of our small-scale hemp growers. Research and extension assistants help in every aspect of the research and extension projects.”

## **The Future of the NC A&T Industrial Hemp Task Force**

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“I have been excited about the fact that our workshops, field days and conferences have provided information that has helped farmers decide if hemp would be a viable crop for them,” he said.

Gu says that the program’s outreach has had real benefits for North Carolina’s hemp farmers.

“We were able to provide them the latest research results on cultivars, fertility management, crop management, testing, harvesting, curing, and postharvest storage,” he said.



Image courtesy of David Straughan.

Through his research, Gu also found information that can help farmers stay compliant.

“My research in open field and high tunnels suggests that the use of plastic mulch in CBD hemp production might result in ‘hot’ plants,” he said. For reference, “hot” plants are hemp plants that exceed the USDA’s legal THC limit of 0.3%.

For now, Gu and his associates focus on developing resources and providing practical education to farmers. This task includes identifying the best CBD cultivars for farming and consumption, and developing soil and crop management practices. It also involves providing research-based solutions and up-to-date government rules and regulations.

The basket of actionable resources all support the Industrial Hemp Program’s bigger goal.

“The most important goal of our program is to help North Carolina small hemp farmers grow and profit from this crop,” said Gu.

## **A Future for Hemp in North Carolina**

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As one of the state’s leading agricultural and technology research institutions, North Carolina A&T sees a future in the hemp industry. Gu agrees that the plant can be a major crop for the state in years to come.

“CBD and other cannabinoids production will for sure play a big role in North Carolina agriculture,” he said.





Image courtesy of David Straughan.

It's not just CBD either. The uses for industrial hemp are wide and varied. Gu says that the state even has historical precedent for the hemp fiber industry.

“More farmers and private industries are interested in fiber production,” he said. “North Carolina has a history in textiles, so I think fiber hemp can contribute greatly in the next chapter. Also, hemp seed oil, hemp meals and hemp grains are all important to cosmetics and healthy foods.”

Gu believes hemp has a place in North Carolina's agricultural world. However, he said that, between laws constantly in flux and companies scrambling to capitalize on the latest boom industry, the world of North Carolina cannabis lacks consistency and clarity. He said that things will need to settle down before hemp can become a viable part of the agricultural economy.

“Hemp is a multipurpose crop,” he said. “Once we calm down from the wild west of CBD, we can place hemp in a reasonably important place in North Carolina agriculture.”



*Want to learn more about a North Carolina politician who wants to make all cannabis legal in the Tar Heel State? How about a farm where you can pick your own CBD buds? Stay tuned to North Carolina News Daily for more cannabis coverage.*

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