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DIY cigarettes? Some smokers start growing tobacco

By STEVE SZKOTAK Associated Press Writer

Something unusual is cropping up alongside the tomatoes, eggplant and okra in Scott Byars' vegetable garden — the elephantine leaves of 30 tobacco plants.

Driven largely by ever-rising tobacco prices, he's among a growing number of smokers who have turned to their green thumbs to cultivate tobacco plants to blend their own cigarettes, cigars and chew. Byars normally pays \$5 for a five-pack of cigars and \$3 for a tin of snuff; the seed cost him \$9.

"I want to get to where I don't have to go to the store and buy tobacco, but I'll just be able to supply my own from one year to the next," Byars said.

In urban lots and on rural acres, smokers and smokeless tobacco users are planting Virginia Gold, Goose Creek Red, Yellow Twist Bud and dozens of other tobacco varieties.

Although most people still buy from big tobacco, the movement took off in April when the tax on cigarettes went up 62 cents to \$1.01 a pack. Large tax increases were also imposed on other tobacco products, and tobacco companies upped prices even more to compensate for lost sales.

Some seed suppliers have reported a tenfold increase in sales as some of the country's 43.3 million smokers look for a cheaper way to get their nicotine fix in a down economy. Cigarettes cost an average of \$4.35 a pack, home growers can make that amount for about 30 cents.

It's the latest do-it-yourself movement as others repair their own cars, swap used clothes and cancel yard work services to save money.

"Cigarette smokers say, 'Yeah, we're going to die of cancer, but do we have to die of poverty as well?'" said Jack Basharan, who operates The Tobacco Seed Co. Ltd. in Essex, England. Virtually all of his increased tobacco seed sales have been in the U.S., he said.

Provided the tobacco isn't sold or traded, the Food and Drug Administration doesn't regulate homegrown tobacco. Most people grow for cigarettes, but some blend their own cigars and chew.

The FDA and U.S. Department of Agriculture don't keep statistics on home growers, though seed suppliers and Internet buzz suggest strong interest.

Seedman.com has sold more than 100,000 packets of tobacco seeds this year, compared with 22,000 in all of 2008, president Jim Johnson said. The Gautier, Miss.-based company offers 40 varieties of tobacco from around the globe and packages various flavor blends for first-time growers.

A grower who purchased one of Johnson's Oriental and Turkish blends for \$24.50 could satisfy a pack-a-day habit for more than three years, according to Johnson's calculations.

However, growing and processing tobacco can challenge even the best gardeners. The nearly microscopic seeds must initially be grown inside and transplanted after the threat of frost has passed.

The plants are susceptible to an army of pests; must be topped, or pruned, to encourage leaf growth; require rotating every few years; and require the proper chemical soil balance. The leaves must be cut and hung to dry.

A seed started in March can be ready to smoke as soon as October. Some anxious growers have been known to microwave leaves to hasten the drying. For purists, the leaves can be cured, or aged, like a fine wine for up to three years.

"It's actually very labor intensive," said Ed Baker, general manager of Cross Creek Seed Inc. in Raeford, N.C., the No. 1 tobacco seed supplier in the U.S. "There's a reason why cigarette companies make all that money. If it was that easy, everyone would be growing their own tobacco."

Cross Creek has seen a big increase in seed requests from home growers but it sells in volume. It's smallest seed offering is 90,000 seeds for \$170.

Novices and veterans can find smoker-friendly havens like howtogrowtobacco.com, a Web site that offers growing and curing tips, often including angry posts over ever-increasing taxes and smoking restrictions.

Many would not discuss their crops with The Associated Press, fearful a high profile would invite government scrutiny and taxes. Others proudly share stories and post photos.

Arthur Skora, 42, records his success growing and curing in Greenwood, Wis., on a how-to DVD he sells online.

"Most of the people who are ordering are just getting fed up with prices and basically they're not going to take it anymore," Skora said.

Saving money wasn't the only motivation for Matt Schoell-Schafer, a landscape architect in Kansas City, who has 50 plants growing in his urban garden.

"It's not being a victim to their manipulation of this product," said Schoell-Schafer, 34, who enjoys an occasional cigar or cigarette. "So I'm sort of liberating myself by growing it myself."

Some growers contend their tobacco concoctions are safer than commercial products, which have a stew of additives ranging from colorings and oils to ammonia.

"The quick answer to that is no," said Thomas Glynn, director of cancer science and trends at the American Cancer Society. Glynn knew of only one study of the health risks of homegrown and commercial blends — and it concluded no difference in safety between the two.

Homegrown tobacco can also contain fungus and mold, which can cause chronic bronchitis and other ailments, Glynn said.

Philip Morris USA, the nation's No. 1 cigarette maker, and other big companies are unlikely to shudder. Philip Gorham, a tobacco industry analyst with the investment research firm Morningstar, said he had no data on smokers who switched to homegrown. But he doesn't see it as a mass movement.

"It's one thing to switch from a premium brand to a discount one. It's quite another to switch from buying a manufactured product to roll your own," Gorham said.

At VirtualSeeds.com, Joyce Moore said she typically sold tobacco seeds as ornamental plants to gardeners who appreciated their elephantine leaves. This year, her Astoria, Ore.-based company was overwhelmed by orders from tobacco users slammed by "the market collapse, the recession, then getting hit with exorbitant tobacco taxes."

Moore doesn't use tobacco herself but has no misgivings about her business.

"If I sold doughnuts in a bakery would I feel guilty because fat people come in and buy them?" she asked. "It just happens to be a very good year for tobacco seeds."

On the Net:

American Cancer Society: <http://www.cancer.org/>

How to Grow Tobacco: <http://www.howtogrowtobacco.com/>

Virtual Seeds: <http://www.virtalseeds.com>

Back Forty Tobacco: <http://www.backfortytobacco.com/>

The Tobacco Seed Co. Ltd.: <http://www.tobacoseed.co.uk/>

Cross Creed Seed Inc. <http://www.crosscreekseed.com/us/index.html>



In an Thursday, Aug. 6, 2009 photo, Scott Byars of Corinth, Miss., snaps the tops of his homegrown tobacco plants in his garden beside his home, in Corinth, Miss. Byars says by snapping the tops of the plants the leaves grow larger and it prevents the plant from flower and pollinating. (AP Photo/Michael H. Miller)

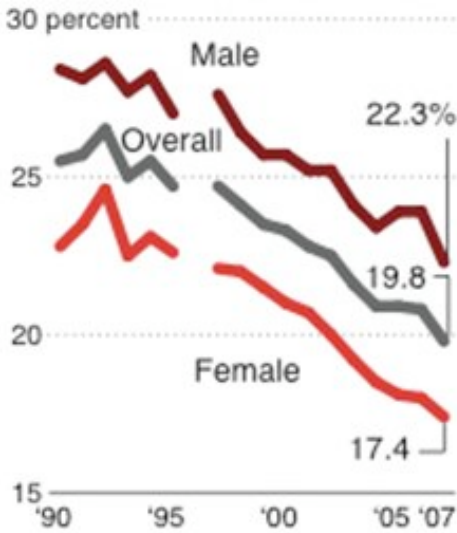


In a Thursday, Aug. 6, 2009 photo, Scott Byars of Corinth, Miss., compares the drying conditions of some of his homegrown tobacco leaves in a drying shed behind his home, in Corinth, Miss.. Byars says that the leaves take 6-8 weeks to fully dry before they can be rolled. (AP Photo/Michael H. Miller)

Smoking less

In 2007, the overall smoking rate dropped 5.7 percent since 1990, with 5 percent fewer women smokers than men.

Percentage of current smoking adults, 1990-2007



NOTE: Data for 1996 not available.

SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention AP

Graphic shows percentage of adult smokers and federal cigarette tax from 1951 to



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