



Season 1 Episode 3 – So You Want to Grow Hemp

August 8, 2022

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Farming Basics Podcast with Olivia Fuller, we'll have sustainable farming tips from growers across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Olivia Fuller:

All right, welcome back. It's Olivia Fuller and your co-host Jacob Kelly. Today, we have Katelyn Kesheimer who is going to talk to us about hemp. The title of the podcast is, So You Want to Grow Hemp, because that is a question that Jacob and I get a lot. So Katelyn, what do you need to know before you get started?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

How much time do we have for this Olivia? So that is a really good question. I try to tell people that they should have all their finances available, all their products, all their label, all their budgets and their end user. So they need to start early and plan for an entire year before they dive in and get a license. It's a very complicated process on the regulatory side. And then on the agronomic side, we are still learning how to grow this plant and then what to do with it once it's harvested.

Olivia Fuller:

So, it's not the get rich quick scheme that most people think it is?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

No, it is not unfortunately. And I tell people to not invest more than they are willing to lose because right now... I've have worked with Jessica Kelton, one of our farm and agribusiness agents, she's done some enterprise budgets for hemp and it's very hard to stay in the positive. With input costs, seed costs, all the labor that's required. This is not an automated crop like we think of when we think of other crops. It's just very, very expensive and the way the markets are now for hemp and the saturation in the market, there is just a lot of product being sold for very little right now.

Olivia Fuller:

Maybe touch on the processing plants, how does that work here in Alabama?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So here in Alabama, we have hemp growers and hemp processors. The hemp processors are the ones that take the biomass from the field and turn it into a new product for the next step of this plant's life. We have hemp grown for fiber for grain and for its floral components and essential oils. The majority of hemp grown in Alabama is for its floral material. So we have floral hemp processors and then we also have fiber hemp processors, and that's a completely different process. You're working with 14, 15, 16 foot tall plants that need to be separated with very difficult and expensive and easily breakable machinery. Whereas floral hemp is going to be much shorter and you have to remove the flowers from the plant and then you extract oils from those flowers, and so it's a very different process. We have more oil now than we did when we first started the program, so that's good. But we still only have one fiber processor in the state in Alabama.

Olivia Fuller:

Should a grower focus on the fiber or the oil, if they're just getting started and they don't have a preference?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

That's a really good question. It depends on their space and equipment. So fiber hemp is going to be grown more typically like a grain crop. You can use a drill cedar, you can use a lot of the equipment we have for grains. And then the harvesting is going to be maybe with some similar equipment with some modifications. So that's going to be much different than growing plants for floral material that are a lot higher input cost and labor. because we don't have equipment, a lot of it's done manually, hand planting, transplants, hand planting seeds, hoeing weeds, because we don't have herbicides that work, manually removing pests, pulling out diseased plants, manually harvesting with the machete or a weed whack or whatever you have because it's a very different type of plant.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So I would encourage people to think about what is your goal with this crop? Are you trying to just make a profit? Do you want to diversify your field and add something new? But, what are you hoping to get out of this? And then we can kind of start the conversation of what type of this plant do you want to grow.

Olivia Fuller:

You mentioned pest there. Well, how do you even navigate that? I mean there's pesticides, I know.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Sure. So that's a great question and we are still navigating it because hemp has not been grown in any substantial acreage for 100 years. What we're growing in now in this environment is very different than 100 years ago. We also don't have modern research on insects and diseases and weeds and we certainly don't have any sort of plant breeding program that's resistant or tolerant of pests. We don't have genetically modified hemp that can repel insects. So on our end on the research, we're doing a lot of just surveys and trying to figure out what is a pest, what diseases can grow on hemp, what insects will feed and cause economic damage. We may find a lot of Japanese beetles on hemp like we do in our gardens, but they're not going to cause any sort of economic loss. We also see a lot of corn ear worm, tomato fruit worm, cotton bowl worm in hemp like we do in our gardens, and that's certainly going to cause a lot of economic loss.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So trying to figure out what is a pest, what is just kind of an incidental and then what's a beneficial. And then putting that all into a fun little snow globe and trying to figure out how to control all them is fun.

Jacob Kelly:

There's different varieties of hemp. Are we going to use different varieties if we're going to grow for fiber versus floral components or are we using the same varieties but just treating them differently?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So they're completely different varieties, yep. And then within the fiber or grain or floral hemp, there are different cultivars that we're still trying to figure out what works well here in Alabama. A lot of the genetics for hemp, whether it's fiber or floral hemp are coming from much more northern regions, Canada, Pacific Northwest, Europe. And they haven't been tested down here in our hot humid environment and very, very wet, but also long growing season. And so, before you even decide what variety you need to know what type of plant you're growing, because the field prep, the seed spacing, the IPM plan is going to be different for all three types.

Jacob Kelly:

Right. Okay. And so most of our growers are growing on plastic or are we doing some bare ground or does it depend on what your end game is?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

A lot of it depends on, and my experience has been, what people have available because there is not years of replicated research on what works best. So we've had it on black plastic, white plastic, bare ground, pots on the ground, pots in a high tunnel, plastic in a high tunnel, in a greenhouse. So there's a lot of different ways to do it.

I would encourage people to look at their finances and what they can make work, because any sort of outdoor hemp is going to be very, very susceptible to insects and diseases. Indoor hemp is also going to be susceptible, but a different set of insects and diseases. And with the different cultivars we have, we're not sure how they respond. There certainly may be some relationship between insect and disease susceptibility, but we're still working through that on the research side.

Jacob Kelly:

Is there organic production in hemp?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yes. So you can grow it in a organically certified field. Because of the wellness component associated with hemp and cannabinoids and CBD products, whether it's tinctures or oils or sleep aids or pet anxiety meds, a lot of companies and growers want to be able to market their product as organic because the general public thinks organic means pesticide free. In the hemp world there are some Armory certified pesticides people can use and there are some non-organic but also biological pesticides. A lot of them don't work, they're they're so soft and the pests we have here in Alabama are very, very difficult to control. So if you're growing outdoor hemp, I would anticipate spending a lot of mechanical removal time because our pesticides don't work super well for the pests we have.

Olivia Fuller:

Okay. So I have a question that might be a loaded question. What about medicinal marijuana?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So, that's a great question. And just for some background, so we're all on the same page, when we're talking about hemp versus marijuana, it's the same species of plant, cannabis, sativa, and the legal definition differentiating the two is that hemp has a lower than 0.3% THC limit. So anything higher than that is legally marijuana, and we also have medical marijuana that was approved in Alabama last year. So where we are right now in early 2022 is there is a committee, they are working on the regulatory side of things, but it's a separate group and license procedure than the hemp program.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So in Alabama, anyone who wants to grow hemp can apply for a license, get approved and grow if everything goes according to plan. Medical marijuana, there's going to be a limited number of licenses given out and there's going to be some for grow and dispensing, and they're going to be a lot more expensive than a hemp license. And there are certain rules about, you have to be an Alabama resident for a long period of time. It has to be grown indoors. But those haven't been released and we haven't had an application process yet. So if people are looking to get into medical marijuana, stay tuned. But all the meetings they have at the state level are public and so you can go and check them out if you're interested.

Olivia Fuller:

Do they have a timeline developed at this point?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

The original timeline was that licenses would be given out in September of 2022. We are now in March of 2022 and there's been no information on the application process or timeline. So my guess is we won't see licenses until at least 2023. So the earliest that people can start purchasing or getting prescriptions for our medical marijuana would be 2023 or even 2024.

Olivia Fuller:

Okay. That's very helpful because I have a lot of growers call and ask. Some of them are already growing CBD, some of them in Delta-8 products, and they think they're just going to leeway right into this medicinal marijuana world.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yes, that seems to be a common thought. I don't know if many people are getting into hemp and then switching over to Delta-8 production from that hemp and how that would impact medical marijuana. But since you mentioned it, there are some also weird legal rules about Delta-8. It's federally legal and Alabama has not banned, they had a bill about a year ago to ban it and it did not get voted on. So, where we are now is Delta-8 is legal in Alabama. But if you are growing and selling Delta-8 products look at the other states that you may be dealing with or selling to because not all states you can do that. Because there are at the state level, Texas is trying, New York is trying and several others have banned Delta-8 products.

Olivia Fuller:

Right. I know that there was a fear of that with some of my growers.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah. From what I hear that bill is not going to be put forth again. So we're in the clear and as long as the DA doesn't say anything, as long as it's a hemp derived product, and that would be Delta-8 then it's federally legal.

Olivia Fuller:

Okay. That's very helpful. I guess, circling back around. What are some of the biggest mistakes you see new hemp growers make and how can they set themselves up for success?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Oh, that's a great question. They dive in headfirst without doing their research and budgeting. I would encourage anyone who is not growing hemp to talk to one of the extension personnel throughout the state that

has experience with it and talk to growers. There's a lot of networks of beginning and experienced cannabis growers in Alabama and other states. And a lot of people have seen dollar signs and seen a lot of CBD products and they think that it's going to be an easy buck and it's not. And so doing your research and knowing what you're in for is going to save you a lot of headache and money. And so that's the biggest mistake is going in investing too much money without correct information and then losing a lot of money.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. I mean, there's so many steps to this. It's not just farming, you're also potentially a processor. You're doing so many things and it might not be worth it.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

I don't have a handbook for how to grow all the different varieties of hemp that people are getting from all these different sources. And a lot of the players in the hemp world are not there to stay and not there to grow a good plant, but they're there to make a buck. And so vetting who you're working with, who you're buying your seeds and your clones from are going to be super important, excuse me. And then at the end of the season, knowing who's going to buy your crop and having that process fleshed out and cover yourself legally. So make sure you have a legally binding contract because a lot of people with the oversupply of hemp biomass have been losing contracts because buyers will pull them. And so making sure it's legally binding and you can't have your buyer pull out at the last second.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. We've seen a lot of people this year with hemp and nowhere for it to go. How can they set themselves up for success though, if they're just now getting started?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So I have told everybody, unless you are dying to grow it this second, wait a little bit. Let us at here at Auburn University and other universities, Alabama State University's doing a lot of research, A&M, we have local data we are generating. Give us a couple years to figure out how to grow this crop so then we can set you up for success. We've had a series of hemp meetings every winter and fall for the last three years. I would encourage people to come to those meetings because even if you don't have an application in or you're not growing, you can learn about the process and plan ahead. You can also meet other growers and talk about who's really good in the business to work with, what has someone found that works really well for a fertilizer and then we can figure out on the research end and do replicated trials. And so give us some time to figure out and maybe jump in a couple years when the market has evened out, the shady people have left the business and what's left are just growers and people who are passionate about the plants.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. Those serious people will be left then.

Jacob Kelly:

I have a question. So for our existing growers, if I have a plant with a suspected disease or problem with it, can I just cut that plant material off and send it to the diagnostics lab? Is there other steps that need to be followed? Should I get extension personnel out there to begin with so that they can handle the plant material? What are the steps for that?

Katelyn Kesheimer:

That's a great question. So first things first, if it is a suspected problem that we can't pinpoint, we would prefer to have the entire plant. So yes, you can certainly cut the whole thing down and mail it or bring it with a copy of your grower's license. So, if you get pulled over or if someone smells the plant in the mail, there is a copy of that grower license in there. We can also have call your local extension agent, we have an extension license that allows us to transport plant material. And so if it's easier, we can make a site visit, take some plant samples, bring them back to the diagnostic lab and see if there's any sort of disease issue, nutrient deficiency or insect problem that we can diagnose. But the easiest way is probably just to mail in the diagnostic lab with your grower's license.

Jacob Kelly:

Right.

Olivia Fuller:

Okay. Well I think those were some very helpful insights on the hemp world. Thank you so much, Katelyn Kesheimer for coming in today and sharing some of this information with the growers because we do get a lot of questions. There's a lot of intrigue around hemp right now in the state.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Sure. And if anyone has any questions, feel free to contact me. All my information is on the Beginning Farmer app and the ACES website.

Olivia Fuller:

Thank you so much.

Speaker 1:

This has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.