

Nanaimo shed fire uncovers elaborate grow-op



Fire investigator Rick Kwasnecha inspects a burned shed at Mountain View Mobile Home Park Tuesday. Hot exhaust from a generator powering a grow up touched off the blaze and a police investigation.

Chris Bush/The News Bulletin

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A structure fire proved instrumental in shedding light on an elaborate grow op in Harewood Monday.

Firefighters went to snuff out a shed fire behind a mobile home in Mountain View Mobile Home Park on Fifth Street at about 10:20 p.m. May 25.

Instead of housing tools, the shed was home to a gas generator powering lights and fans for a grow op. The shed also housed three 208-litre plastic barrels filled with gasoline and was specially built with insulation to silence noise from the generator's motor.

One man was arrested at the scene.

Next door neighbour Glenn Mallory said the suspect was always friendly and talkative, but never entertained visitors. Mallory, who often does macro photography and plays with his dog in his backyard metres from the shed, had no idea what was inside.

"I was out in the backyard lots and I never heard a thing," said Mallory. "I can't believe it. On the news you see about grow ops and stuff and you think, 'How can they not see anything? How can they not notice anything?' Now I know."

Police at the scene said they confiscated 500 marijuana plants from three separate rooms in an addition at the back of the mobile home.

They also found a work van rigged with more fuel barrels and a pumping system powered by car batteries that

allegedly was used to bring in fuel and transfer it to the barrels in the shed.

Rick Kwasnecha, Nanaimo Fire Rescue investigator, said the van was also modified with an external fuel filler cap that averted suspicion at gas stations by making it appear the suspect was simply filling his gas tank.

Fortunately the fuel stored in the shed did not ignite during the fire.

“I don’t think they [fuel barrels] were full, but I don’t think they were drained off before crews got there,” said Kwasnecha. “If they would have been full and that fire got ahold of them, that’d be a different story there for sure.”

He said the amount of sound insulation in the shed likely prevented the fire from spreading into the fuel storage compartment.

Had the fuel ignited, the resulting fire could easily destroyed the suspect’s mobile home and two neighbouring mobile homes.

Firefighters also did not immediately know what was stored in the barrels and whether they were looking at chemical storage for a methamphetamine lab – a potentially more highly explosive situation. Makeshift wiring to run the grow op also posed added hazards.

“It was pretty scary,” said Kwasnecha.

The suspect’s name and age are being withheld until he is charged.

Neighbour Eric Steed witnessed the suspect being arrested by police.

“It’s one thing to set up a grow op out in the bush or some rural area, but you’ve got to have some balls to set one up in the middle of a mobile home park,” Steed said.

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