


High Holy Day for Potheads

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April has two days when many Americans, en masse, engage in something that's plainly illegal but is, they swear, OK to do anyway because everyone does it and it doesn't hurt a soul and it makes you feel just so very happy.

The first of these days has already passed: April 15, tax day, when millions of Americans, according to the latest research, fail to pay billions in taxes. The other day is April 20 -- Saturday -- a day when thousands, if not millions, will "mow the grass." That's a polite way of saying that these folks get baked, blitzed, paggered, blazed, obliterated, perved, shmacked ... in other words, they get high, as 4/20 is recognized by many as "national smokers day."

The term "420" and its attendant traditions date back to the 1970s, but at least some evidence exists -- enough to convince any stoner, at least -- that the term has experienced something of a resurgence in our electronic times.

On message boards and community sites across the Web, it's possible to find people who are "420 friendly," meaning that they'd love to meet you and smoke your dope.

And for such people, 4/20 is the recognized day to get your smoke on. And especially at 4:20 a.m. or p.m. on 4/20, and especially while listening to Phish. This year, dozens of celebrations are planned across the globe.

In San Francisco, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, NORML, will finish up its two-day conference "celebrating personal freedom."

"Once again we have scheduled the conference to coincide with '4/20,' that date that has become associated in the popular culture as a special day for marijuana smokers -- sort of what 'It's Miller time' has become to beer drinkers," the group said on its site. "We hope to build on that tradition and encourage supporters from across the country to join us in San Francisco as a way to celebrate 4/20."

The event comes after a week of attention focused on NORML, which spent half a million dollars to run ads (PDF) in New York City asking Mayor Michael Bloomberg to fine and ticket -- rather than arrest -- people caught smoking marijuana in the street. The ads feature Bloomberg's response to a *New York* magazine reporter's query about whether he'd ever used marijuana. The mayor said, "You bet I did. And I enjoyed it."

Given the nature of the celebration, of course, not all of the scheduled events are so political. Most, it seems, are music festivals that might have been going on anyway, but which promise to have some added pep in honor of the day.

The Web is rife with speculation regarding the origin of the term "420." An old yarn has it that 420 was a California police code cops used when they'd spotted someone getting high, and that drug users co-opted the word. Some think it has to do with Hitler's birthday, April 20th -- which is, not entirely coincidentally, also the day in 1999 that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 13 people, and themselves, at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

But the consensus opinion has come to rest on a theory put forth by Steven Hager, the editor of *High Times*, in the magazine in 1998. Hager told the story of the Waldos, a group of San Rafael High School kids who gave Hager evidence -- letters, and so on -- to show they had created the term 420.

This is how the term began, according to Hager's article: "One day, while (the Waldos) were sitting on the wall, a friend gave them a treasure map to a pot patch on nearby Point Reyes Peninsula. 'His brother grew the patch,' said Steve (one of the Waldos).

"The Waldos decided to meet after school and pick the patch. Since school got out at 3:10, and since some of the Waldos had after-school activities that lasted approximately one hour, someone decided they should meet at exactly 4:20 p.m., at the statue of Louis Pasteur, which was located near the entrance to the school parking lot."

After that, the Waldos -- who have their own site at Waldo420.com -- naturally began using 420 as shorthand for cannabis. The Waldos were big fans of the Grateful Dead, and, as Hager explains in his article, "the 420 expression leaked into the Deadhead community and spread from there."

In an e-mail message, Hager said that the Internet further aided the spread of the term, as "Deadheads were the first big group of Internet users."

Asked what he would be doing to celebrate this year's 4/20, Hager wrote that he will be "in Magic Meadow, near the top of Overlook Mountain, which is just above Woodstock, New York."

And what will people do after 4/20, when pot day is over? They'll smoke more, according to one post on the Bay Area Community site, Craigslist.

"A bunch of 420 worshipers who didn't get enough on 4/20 are meeting at Raleigh's in Berkeley on Telegraph (Avenue at) 5:30 on Sunday," it said. "Come burn in summer with us."