



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

CRIME

Amid North Port's vacant lots, grow houses sprout

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)
scott.davidson@heraldtribune.com

Published: Thursday, April 21, 2016 at 3:57 p.m.

Near the city's eastern edge and surrounded by hundreds of vacant, pre-platted lots, the house with a green roof and trim was as inconspicuous as it was isolated.

But inside, police say, a pot-growing operation was flourishing.

In what North Port police say is one of the largest grow-house busts in the city's history, detectives last week found 155 marijuana plants in various stages of development inside the three-bedroom home at 3939 Bridge Drive. Growing equipment including lights and ventilation fans, and police also found reflective insulation board.

"Where houses are few and far between, it lends itself perfectly to these operations," police Commander Andrew Rose said. "You can easily hide in plain sight."

While it stood out for its size, the operation on Bridge Drive was not unusual in North Port, where police have uncovered at least 13 marijuana grow houses since 2011. The city of Sarasota, by contrast, has had no grow-house busts during the same period.

The disparity is caused by key differences in the nearby cities, said Rose, who oversees North Port's special investigations unit, tasked with handling narcotics investigations.

While both have similar populations, North Port's sprawling suburbia is nearly seven times larger than Sarasota's condensed urban core. Sarasota's population-per-square-mile is six times denser than that of North Port, according to 2010 census data.

Rose said marijuana growers target not only secluded areas, but also ones where they can buy or rent houses for cheap or even take over abandoned houses, all of which were in abundance in North Port after the housing meltdown.

The growers take their operations inside because they can produce a high-quality, potent plant while enjoying the privacy of being behind closed doors. Rose said it can easily cost tens of thousands of dollars to outfit a grow house, meaning there's often a good chance of an organized crime ring being involved.

"We've found out that many of these operations are not a mom-and-pop kind of place," he said. "It's not uncommon for these things to be part of a larger organization, and there's just a caretaker at the house."

The largest grow house bust in department history took place in October 2013 when police raided two adjacent rental homes in the rural North Port Estates neighborhood. Police seized about 125 marijuana plants valued at about \$125,000.

Seven grow houses were searched in 2014, and officers seized more than 175 plants and 40 pounds of processed marijuana. An ounce of pot can sell for \$200 to \$500 on the street, Rose said, depending on supply and demand.

While last Friday's bust produced more plants than the record-setting October 2013 investigation, a number of the plants were small, making police hesitant to call it the city's largest bust. The 155 plants' total weight was only about 48 pounds.

Detectives served a search warrant at the home just after 10 a.m. and arrested Nazario Rodriguez-Gil, 50, and Keyla Cid-Garcia, 26, as they exited the back of the home.

Neither suspect had prior arrests in Sarasota County. Both have already posted bond on their cannabis trafficking and drug paraphernalia-related charges.

Rodriguez-Gil told police that he is a handyman from Miami. Authorities have previously connected marijuana grow houses to drug cartels based in the South Florida city.

"We are working with agencies across the state to pinpoint any large connections," Rose said, adding that police were investigating if the pot was being sold locally or transported elsewhere.

County records show Frank Garcia bought the home from Norsota Associates, LP, for \$105,000 in March 2012. Garcia, 39, could not be reached for comment.

Rodriguez-Gil and Cid-Garcia had been sleeping in the home's living room because every other room was being used to store equipment and items to grow marijuana. Police say those items aren't hard to get.

"Ninety-nine percent of it you can pick up at Home Depot," Rose said. "Online, forget it, it's just wide open."

Chris Thomas, owner of a Sarasota County-based damage restoration company that rehabilitates former grow houses, said he's seen some elaborate equipment setups on the job.

Caches of solar-powered batteries can fuel high-intensity lamps while avoiding a conspicuously expensive electric bill. Inches of spray foam insulation block heat from escaping outside the grow house, where police could detect it with thermal cameras.

Hydroponic systems, which grow plants in water rather than in soil, can require even more maintenance and expertise.

"That takes someone who knows about plumping and filtration to run that type of operation," said Thomas, owner of Biologic Waste Solutions.

Thomas said it usually costs at least \$10,000 to repair a house used in a large-scale marijuana growing operation. The home's owner is almost always stuck footing the bill.

"Insurance companies don't cover the damage to these homes or the cleanup because a crime was committed," he said. "We get a lot of emotional people that are very financially stressed by the situation. People are calling me from Michigan saying, 'I got a rental unit, and this is what happened inside of it.'"

Copyright © 2016 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.