

Cultivation at NETA

A cement fortified, nondescript 60,000-square foot brick warehouse in Franklin is the source of the cannabis that helps tens of thousands of Massachusetts patients and is the heartbeat of NETA's marijuana dispensaries. While NETA's dispensaries have earned a gold star approval from its patients and "Best of Boston" status from Boston Magazine, few are aware of the quality control, testing, and safety measures NETA has implemented to ensure that its patients receive the best medicine available.



Growing and processing marijuana requires knowledgeable employees, and for the 150 people who work at NETA's Franklin facility, there's a palpable sense of commitment and purpose. Immediately upon entering the building, employees and visitors are greeted by a large display that spells out NETA's mission in three phrases: Operationally Compliant, Responsibility, and Do the Right Thing.

Compliance is the cornerstone of any program that serves public health. As such, it is a subject that seems to be on the lips of every employee at NETA. Upon hiring, all employees must successfully complete a mandatory orientation program.

To satisfy NETA's rigorous safety standards, employees receive extensive training which, in addition to a substantial review of company and state regulations, emphasizes the necessary safety and sanitation protocols for the cultivation and processing of medicinal cannabis. Additionally, each employee receives comprehensive training tailored to his or her individual role and the specific safety elements associated with it. Workers are meticulous about hygiene. Employees wear sterile uniforms and gloves at all times. Proper adherence to these protocols is not optional and NETA's department managers and compliance personnel are dedicated to this practice.

One key to quality and safety is a well-designed facility that is subject to continual upgrades. "The entire building was designed around compartmentalizing each step in the growing, drying, curing, and storing process to minimize the risk of cross-contamination," explained Dave Ovelman, NETA's Head Grower.

Before work begins, employees (and all visitors) must pass through a sealed "air shower," which removes any outside contaminants from a person's body. Once through this gate, there is a warren of white, bright rooms where marijuana plants are grown. Each room is spotless – workers monitor the air temperature and humidity throughout the day.



Inside one of the veg rooms at NETA's Franklin facility.



Healthy blades on a growing young plant.

Head Grower

Dave Ovelman

Director of Operational Compliance

Amanda Rositano

Cultivation Manager

Trent Lynch

Each room has its own ventilation system, which constantly pumps in fresh air and throughout the building, air scrubbers remove impurities. NETA also utilizes its own water filtration systems to minimize possible contaminants. "While our public water source passes all necessary state requirements for use in cultivation, NETA's own standards require additional water purification through the use of a reverse-osmosis system," explained Amanda Rositano, NETA's Director of Operational Compliance.

As the plants progress through their life stages, they do so in dedicated areas and rooms of the facility. Plants typically begin as clones in a starter medium and are confined to a softly-lit, highly humid environment for about three weeks. They then move to the nursery where they are transplanted into larger rockwool cubes, given higher intensity light via blue spectrum heavy compact fluorescents, and allowed to grow for another two weeks. Next, they are moved to the vegetative rooms. This represents the "teenage years" for the plants where significant growth takes place and mandatory "training" and pruning begins. Here, the plants get their first taste of high intensity lighting. This stage proceeds for three weeks. Finally, when ready, the plants are transferred to rooms where they produce the flower that is so medicinally important. Here, they remain for 60 days and may grow as high as four feet. Toward the end of this cycle and prior to harvest, a final "flush" (free of nutrients) is fed to all plants to ensure that no salts or metals remain to degrade the quality or safety of the flower.

After every stage, each cultivation room is thoroughly cleaned by a team of workers. "The rooms are completely scoured, scrubbed, vacuumed, bleached, and mopped. We bleach the trays, we bleach the racks, and we also take the fans apart and bleach them. We scrub the room from floor to ceiling in order to maintain sanitary conditions," said Trent Lynch, NETA's Cultivation Manager, who noted that workers also sterilize each room with ozonated water, which provides additional safety for plants and workers.

NETA employees constantly monitor the growth and health of each plant. After the plants are harvested, a sample is taken from each batch and sent offsite to an independent lab for analysis, as required by state law. The lab tests for the cannabinoid profile, and for contaminants such as mold, mildew, heavy metals, plant-growth regulators, and pesticides. To date, NETA's products have passed all lab tests.

Under the medical marijuana program, NETA is also subject to regular inspections by the state's Department of Public Health. Inspections may be announced or unannounced and occur at least once a month at each of NETA's facilities. "These inspections ensure that NETA is compliant with all state regulations – but product safety and security are usually at the core of what the DPH is looking for during inspections," said Rositano. "NETA has been subject to dozens of DPH inspections, and has a solid track record of compliance, cleanliness and pro-activity around continually improving our operation. The DPH inspectors often acknowledge that NETA tends to set the bar for the industry."



Clones beginning their journey at NETA in Franklin.