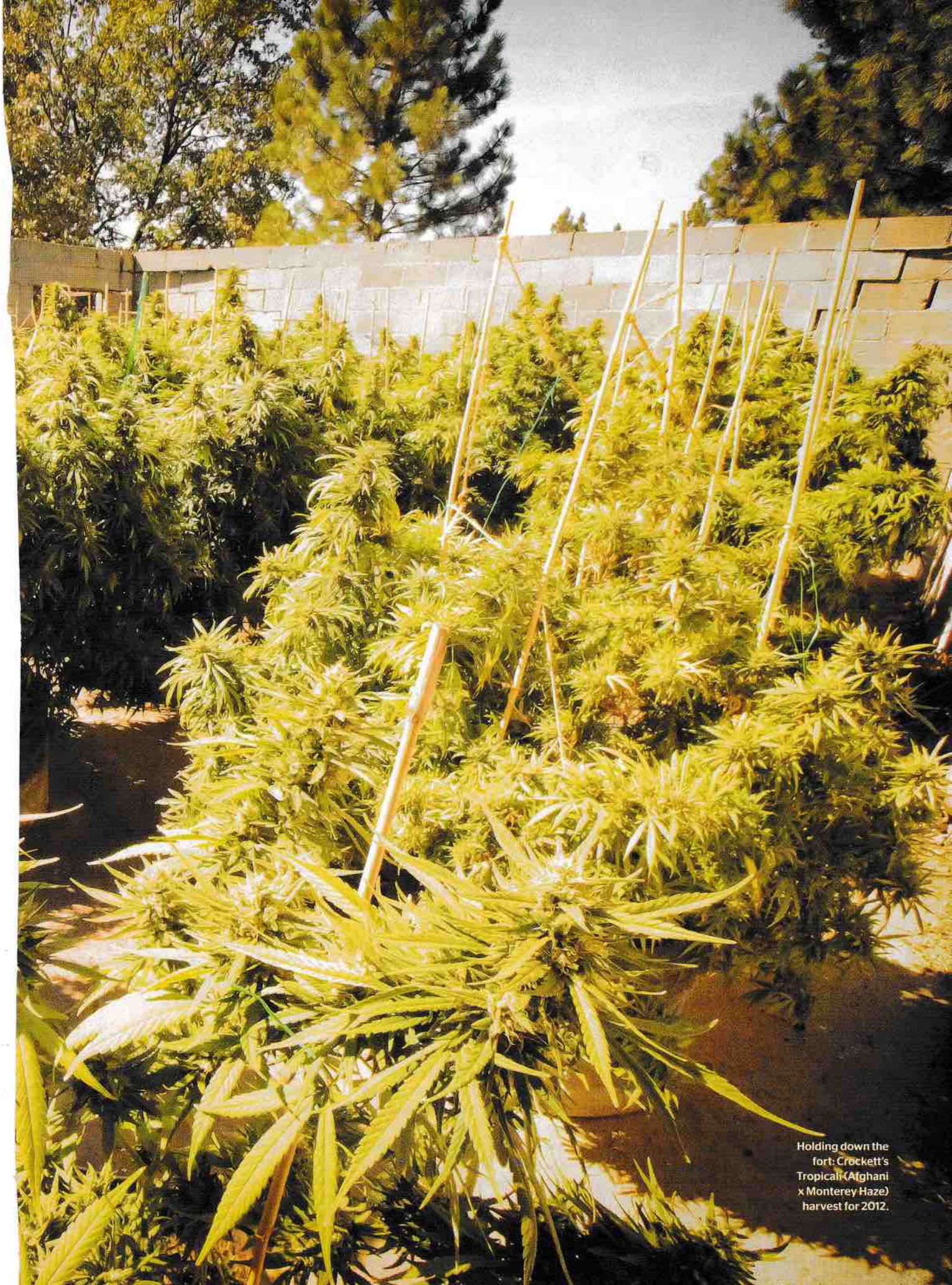




Sensi in the Sierras

The altitude isn't the only thing that could be described as "high" up in these mountains. As with the more famous pot-producing hills of Humboldt, Mendocino and Trinity counties farther north, cannabis cultivation is the top industry in this part of the Sierras. From backyard grows to commercial medical ops to cartel-controlled mega-gardens, marijuana reigns supreme around here. Read on as we explore one grower's thriving plot of boutique varieties, many of which are genetic treasures available at select L.A. dispensaries and instead kept secret (until now) by this discerning breeder.

By Justin Hampton, Photos by Steve Payne



Holding down the fort: Crockett's Tropical (Afghani x Monterey Haze) harvest for 2012.



The Haze (a.k.a. Monterey Haze), a foundational Sierra strain.

Maybe all the wolves will lose my scent And I can stay here for a while.—Unknown Mortal Orchestra, “Little Blu House”

Harvest Moon

Celestial light reflects off the moon’s face onto the canyon, so bright that you may as well shut off your headlights and smartphone and allow the stars to guide your way. Reception this far above sea level is a tricky proposition anyway, and the roads here are a barren and lonely expanse that reflects the sky’s hazy blue illumination for miles on end. A fresh round of the Central Valley’s periodic bouts of fecundity has commenced, and it sounds like everything in the forests is hissing with delight. This year, I’ve been invited to the party.

My host is Crockett, a third-generation pot farmer who has collected and archived a formidable array of super-potent cannabis strains, some of them deriving from vintage ’70s Haze strains, others procured over a decades-long inquiry into the cannabis plant’s many flavors and moods. From there, Crockett and a close-knit team of growers have assiduously crossed the strains they’ve accumulated to develop a collection of connoisseur phenotypes utterly unique to the region’s Mediterranean climate and mountainous terrain. Many of the strains he grows—in particular the Los Angeles Medical Cannabis Cup–nominated

Private Reserve and a brand-new taste treat he calls the Tanj—are of his own genetic invention, highly prized by patients at LA’s higher-end dispensaries and available nowhere else in the world. He’s featured prominently in Mark Haskell Smith’s drug-tourist odyssey *Heart of Dankness: Underground Botanists, Outlaw Farmers and the Race for the Cannabis Cup* (Broadway Books), and his crops epitomize the specimens of “dank” bud that Smith comes to admire.

Smith describes Crockett in the book as a sort of gentle giant who could turn menacing if provoked, but once I finally meet him, I realize that it would take a lot to provoke him. Nowadays, thanks to the medical boom, local growers like him can cultivate just under 100 plants legally (at least as far as the state is concerned), so even the Mexican cartels have moved down from their illegal park grows to set up shop. Sure, there’s Operation Mercury, the joint federal/local anti-grow-op task force that still racks up weekly mentions in the local papers, but those guys have come and gone in this area, so Crockett’s harvest is safe for now. And thanks to a good, dry extended summer in the region, Crockett’s plants, he assures me, are looking robust. I’ll see for myself tomorrow.

Diamonds in the Rough

Crockett picks me up early the next day and drives me to the first grow site. It’s located in the mountains at a 5,000-foot elevation. The US Forestry Service website gushes over the rare diversity of evergreens in the lower montane, which testifies to the land’s ability to support all sorts of life. Of course, the Forestry Service wasn’t referring to Armenian campers doing Journey karaoke or seven-foot-tall cannabis plants, but both have been sighted in and around the property we’re heading to. Once we reach the house—a dun-red cabin with a wooden deck out front and a shooting target perched on a stump 50 feet away—we can see the hoses leading down the declivity toward a small shed. Crockett shows us the way.

The first rarity he introduces us to is the Monterey Haze a.k.a. “The Haze” or “Queen Bee.” Crockett traces this plant’s lineage all the way back to the original Haze seeds that eventually grew the Amsterdam market. This particular plant is still flowering, and Crockett wonders aloud whether they may need to enclose it in a greenhouse, slow as it is. But this particular Haze pheno, along with the Cali Haze growing close by, is literally