

Cops bust large marijuana operation in former Berardi's restaurant

Two METRICH law enforcement agencies seized evidence of one of the largest marijuana-grow operations in the Norwalk area Wednesday.

"This was a joint effort between the Norwalk Police Department and the Huron County Sheriff's Office," police Detective Sgt. Jim Fulton said.

The suspect, Thomas G. Sterling, 31, of 29 Milan Road, Monroeville, is charged with tampering with evidence. If convicted, he faces nine months to three years in prison.

"We believe Thomas Sterling was responsible for cultivating the marijuana at Berardi's (Catering)," sheriff's Detective Sgt. Josh Querin said.



The investigation started a few days ago when police Sgt. Seth Fry received information about Sterling from a tipster.

"Sgt. Querin was able to corroborate some stuff as was Sgt. Fry," Fulton said.

Authorities obtained a search warrant Wednesday from Norwalk Municipal Court Judge Eric Weisenburger.

"We had information on a marijuana grow here," Fulton said, referring to Berardi's Catering, 204 Cleveland Road. "Obviously the information was accurate."

Using the warrant at Berardi's were Fulton, Fry, Officers Paul Gardner and Tim Skinner, as well as sheriff's office personnel Querin and Detectives Kayla Zander and Eric Bardar, Sgt. Tod Wagner and Deputy Mitch Cawrse.

At 9:57 a.m. Wednesday, firefighters gained entry to Berardi's for officers.

"We ended up getting assistance from the fire department. They had a dead bolt (on the door)," Fulton said.

"You could smell it from the outside when we got here," Fulton said, referring to the marijuana.

Officers confiscated 78 marijuana plants from Berardi's.

"There were 13 small plants. ... Most of them were mature -- ready to be harvested," Fulton said. "It looks like they were cloning plants and had several different varieties."

The detective estimated the biggest plants were "better than 3 feet (tall), which was consistent with the information we received."

"He had in fact started harvesting some of them," Fulton added. "He made some admissions."

Officers also seized various lighting equipment from Berardi's.

"He (Sterling) told Seth there was \$10,000 worth of equipment," Fulton said.

In a related move, Querin and other sheriff's deputies used a warrant Wednesday at Sterling's residence in Monroeville. A person called the *Reflector* newsroom and reported there was a house marked off with police tape.

"There were no plants growing (there) at the time. ... When the search warrant was executed, Thomas Sterling was the only one in the home," said Querin, although Sterling reportedly told a detective "he had grown marijuana at his residence in the past."

Deputies seized various lighting equipment, a small amount of cash and various pieces of suspected drug paraphernalia from Sterling's home.



"There were three guns seized from the residence as well as the grow equipment," Querin said.

"There were signs of a young child in the house who stays with (Sterling) from time to time. He said it was a boy (who is) 9 years old," the detective added.

Once deputies determined Sterling lives in Monroeville, they had Monroeville Police Chief Gary Lyons attempt to contact the suspect.

"Prior to our arrival, he had flushed marijuana down the toilet," Querin said. "He received some intelligence we were coming to his house and

decided to discard the marijuana."

The marijuana plants seized from Berardi's will need to be dried and weighed.

"We'll probably end up taking them to the Mansfield Police Department. It will have to dry for about two weeks," Fulton said.

Denise Berardi-Waaland and her husband, Larry, sold the Norwalk Berardi's restaurant building on Cleveland Road at an auction during the summer of 2013. The couple retired after more than a combined 70 years in the food business.

Fulton said Sterling had been renting the eastern portion of the building "since shortly after they closed the restaurant."

"I think this (marijuana grow) started shortly after the restaurant closed," Fulton said. "He's only renting half of the building."

However, it's unclear what connection, if any, Sterling has to Berardi's or its owners.



"This was probably the biggest one (grows) I've seen in Norwalk," Fulton said. "This is only the second one I've seen on this scale."

"Occasionally you'll see someone growing marijuana plants in their house. When you see a couple plants, that's for personal use," the detective explained.

"I believe he (Sterling) was going to sell it," Fulton added.

On the street, 1/8 of an ounce of marijuana sells for \$25 to \$35.

"It depends on the quality you're buying," Fulton said. "(Marijuana) with higher THC will be more expensive."

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