Kenaf could become new cash crop in La.

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JEANERETTE — Growing in several sugarcane fields around here are some extremely tall plants which look suspiciously like marijuana.

But the tall, fibrous plants aren’t pot; they’re a plant called Kenaf, and they could mean a new angle on processing Kenaf.

Kenaf has been used in Africa as a textile product, but it is processed by hand. With a mechanical processing process, the crop will be much more valuable, and its uses more widespread.

Harold Willett and his company, H. Willett and Associates, have teamed up with Charles Lanie of White Star Farms, David Gausgard of Crop Genetics International, Stevens Willett of Cameco Industries and Linda DeLano of Computers for All to form Natural Fibers of Louisiana, Inc.

The company has plans to build a Kenaf processing plant in the Jeanerette area — a plant that will be clean, without smoke, water or noise discharge.

The plant will employ 24 people the first year, about $4 the next.

The processed Kenaf yields two main products — K-bast and K-core. K-bast is a fiber, long and jute-like, and extremely strong. It can be used to produce fiber mats for grass, carpets and automobile door panels or to weave burlap or make rope.

The K-core is highly absorbent and light, so it can be used as an animal bedding that is cheaper than wood chips and more absorbent. It also will not pack — and that means stalls don’t have to be mucked out as often. The core has no scent or taste, so animals won’t be attracted to it.

The core can be ground into different sizes, providing large chips for horses, or smaller, litter-sized chips for turkeys and other birds. The core also can be used, in large chips, as a packing material. All packages sent out from H. Willett and Associates are packed with K-core and a flyer explaining what it is.

The K-core is more desirable than non-biodegradable plastic foam peanuts, Willett said.

Experimentation is also under way to see if finely ground core can be used as filler for disposable baby diapers, or as a fiber source in food. The plant is not poisonous; it just has no taste — not unlike many other sources of fiber humans now consume.

Aside from its many uses, Kenaf will offer a cash crop to sugarcane farmers, Willett said.

"Every third or fourth year, the cane farmer has from November to September about 25 percent of his land idle. They have been planting beans on it, but that’s a sure way of going into debt,” Willett said. “This is a better alternative than the land being idle, and it offers the farmer an income for his acreage, that’s almost as good as a crop of cane.”

A relative of okra and cotton, Kenaf grows extremely fast, with harvest coming about 150 days after planting. Also, it can be planted on a standard cane row with grain drill planters, and harvesting can be followed by cane planting with a minimum of till work for the farmer, Willett said.

It is planted in April or early May, so Louisiana Kenaf will be harvested earlier to accommodate fall planting of sugarcane, Willett said.

The plant grows to about 10 or 12 feet within the 150 days — Louisiana Kenaf usually will be harvested at about nine feet, Willett said. The crop produces approximately six tons of dry material per acre.

Although Willett has designed machinery specifically for harvesting Kenaf, it can be harvested with sugarcane harvesting equipment, another plus to cane farmers who can cut their operation costs.

In their early weeks, the Kenaf plants closely resemble marijuana plants, but smoking the leaves doesn’t do anything for you; it just takes your voice away for a few days, Willett said. At maturatation, the plants have tall stalks with leaves and hibiscus-like flowers on top.

Test acreage has been planted on White Star Farms for the past three years, and the company now is contacting local farmers to plant 1,000 acres in 1991, Willett said. The test acreage will be increased until it hits 3,000 in 1994, he said.

But finding farmers to test the crop hasn’t been hard.

“We’ve got cane farmers lined up down the street,” Willett said.