Craft beer’s popularity offers hop for crop growers

One of the growing trends in Ohio and the rest of the country is visiting local breweries to enjoy craft beer. There were less than ten breweries in Ohio a decade ago; today, the Ohio Craft Brewers Association lists 212 breweries. Even Findlay has one, and recently the press mentioned that another brewery may come to town.

Fine craft beer requires high quality hops for the production process. Hops provide the flavor of the beer. Many of the hops are imported for Ohio’s brewing industry needs.

However, “locally grown” is another trendy thing wanted by the public. To meet this demand, craft brewers would like to buy Ohio-grown hops to market their unique flavors as “locally made from home grown hops.”

Ohio farmers across the state have begun to grow hops to meet this demand. Since hops are grown vertically, less land is needed. Hop plantings are called “yards” rather than fields, and are similar to grape plantings, which are called vineyards. The Ohio Hops Grower Guilds claims 75 members across the state.

Hops are not a new crop to Ohio. Producers quit growing the crop decades ago because of disease and insects. Today these concerns can be managed with disease resistant varieties and integrated pest management programs for insects.

Hops do not require a lot of land, but the crop is labor intensive. A new hop yard will cost between $20,000 and $25,000 depending whether a grower selects rhizomes or plants for establishment. This does not include land costs. A typical hop yard is about one acre.

Hops (Humulus lupulus L.) are hardy perennial plants that grow as climbing vines. They may grow up to 25 feet in a single season. The vines die back each year.

Hops are either male or female, but only female plants produce flowers that are used by the brewing industry. Male plants are needed, though, to pollinate flowers on the female plants.

Hops are native to the temperate zones of the Northern Hemisphere. They are found wild in Western Europe, Asia and certain parts of North America. In North America, hops are being grown as far north as Canada and as far south as the Carolinas; therefore the ability to grow hops is usually not limited by location.

The health of the vine is more dependent on the grower’s ability to provide proper growing conditions and care. Under good conditions, a mature hop plant will produce ½ to two pounds of dried flowers.

Hops require 120 days to produce a crop. Vines will need to be supported off the ground. In Ohio, flowers develop in June and July and mature early August to mid-September. After the flowers ripen, the vines will continue to store reserves in the rhizomes until the first freeze.

Hops prefer full sun and rich, well-drained soils. Soil pH should be between 6 and 7. If drainage is a problem, raised beds can be built using surrounding top soil mixed with organic matter. It generally takes three years of growth before the first hops can be harvested.

The public has the opportunity to visit a nearby hop yard this coming weekend. Arcadia Buckeye Hops is having an open house, Saturday, July 25, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The yard is located at Cunningham Farms at 18745 County Road 108, Arcadia, OH 44804.

Public will be able to view eight different hop varieties that will be harvested over the next four weeks. Varieties include such recognized genetics as Cascade, Centennial, Columbus and Arcadia.

The yard is smaller than an acre of land, and the vines are suspended on a trellis system on poles that are 15 to 20 feet high. At the open house, individuals can learn about hop production including timeline for plantings, water needs, nutrition requirement, pest management and the harvest process.

Individuals will be able to see the mounds for the hop plants' trellis system be set up, irrigation and drainage systems, line drops for the vines, and the hop harvest and storage process.

Take advantage of this open house and see what gives that local craft beer its unique flavor and how one local farmer is meeting the demands for local foods. Please call Derek Cunningham, owner of Arcadia Buckeye Hops, for additional information about the hop yard and open house, 419-348-1896.

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