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Carolina grower 'hopping' into new crop

Apr 7, 2010 10:14 AM, By Dee Shore, North Carolina State University

Hops are climbing perennials that on most farms are grown on expensive 20-foot trellis systems, he explains. The up-front costs that such systems require aren't immediately recouped because, as with winegrapes, hops take about three years to be fully established.

When Van Burnette wanted a drought-resistant crop to try on his 6-acre farm near Black Mountain, N.C., he decided on hops.

The problem is, no one really knows much about how the essential beer ingredient will grow in North Carolina, much less whether burgeoning interest in local beers and home brewing will translate into a sustainable market.

North Carolina State University specialists are out to change that, cooperating with Burnette and a few other pioneering North Carolina hops growers to figure out viable production, post-harvest and marketing options.

At the university's field laboratory off Lake Wheeler Road in Raleigh, Rob Austin and Deanna Osmond, of the Department of Soil Science, have planted a quarter-acre experimental hop yard. And from the Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center in Mills River, horticulture specialist Jeanine Davis is monitoring conditions at four mountain farms where hops are being grown.

Some of the key questions the scientists will be asking: Can new varieties and better production practices ease the disease pressures that pushed the East Coast hops industry to Oregon and Washington decades ago? What types of nutrients and soils do the fast-growing plants need? And do local conditions impart flavors and aromas that beer producers will be interested in buying?

Austin, a geographic information specialist, has some experience with hops: He's a home brewer, and for eight years he's been growing a few plants along a fence in his backyard in Apex.

But, he points out, there's a big difference between growing something in your backyard and growing it on a scale that makes it a worthwhile commercial endeavor.

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Also, cost-effective mass production requires large acreage and specialized machinery for harvesting the flowers (or cones, as they are called), drying them and turning them into pellets. Such machinery is used in Oregon and Washington, which currently have the national hops market sown up.

But a few years ago there was a national hops shortage, which raised the price of hops — and the hopes of growers looking for alternative crops.

Austin says the Raleigh home brew store he bought hops from even went as far as to limit the amount of hops a customer could buy. That led him to wonder if North Carolina farmers might be able to help fill the gap.

Davis says scores of growers had similar ideas.

"When it comes to interest in growing hops, people are coming out of the woodwork. We had 100 people on a hops tour we had last year," Davis says. "But we need to stress this is very risky. We know very little about it. And we have real concerns."

She, Austin and Burnette think North Carolina is unlikely to become a major hops producer. The major hops-growing region is drier than North Carolina, and this makes them concerned about the damage diseases such as downy mildew and powdery mildew could cause. But they are hopeful new, more resilient hops varieties and advances in disease control might make it easier to avoid devastating losses.

Burnette is looking forward to being involved in the North Carolina State hops research project, which is funded by a one-year grant from Golden LEAF, a foundation that supports research into economic alternatives for tobacco-dependent communities.

Burnette's farm has been in his family for 150 years, and he's hopeful niche markets for crops like hops and blueberries and associated tourism will prove economically sustainable.

A Western North Carolina AgOptions grant from North Carolina Cooperative Extension enabled him to set up his hop yard, and he's hopeful the grant-funded research project will lead to reliable production recommendations.

"The hops project can't do anything but benefit me and the rest of us growers," he says. "I know that I found it frustrating — and so did the other growers — that there's not enough known about hops. ... I mean, how do you know what hops need as far as the soil? And how are we going to take care of these pests and diseases? And how are we going to know for sure what kind of pests and diseases we have?"