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Black Mountain News



Photo by Mark Vanderhoff

(above) Van Burnette, of Black Mountain, stands among the trellises upon which hops vines grow at his farm.

Hops: a future cash crop?

By Mark Vanderhoff
STAFF WRITER

Van Burnette's land has been in his family for 200 years, and has been operating as farmland for a century. His ancestors were some of the first settlers in the Swannanoa Valley.

Today, Burnette is a pioneer in his own right, as one of the first farmers in Western North Carolina to commercially grow hops, an ingredient for beer.

"I always wanted to be in some kind of niche," Burnette said. "That's always been my thing."

Burnette started his "hopyard" this year, and recently sold his first harvest to local homebrewers. He hopes to one day sell fresh hops to local microbreweries.

If he and others are successful, they could be at the forefront of a new crop for area farmers. Burnette and others see a growing demand for both local products and craft beer.

Despite an economic downturn last year, the craft brewing industry grew by 5.9 percent by vol-

ume and 10.1 percent by dollars, according to the Brewers Association, an industry trade group. Craft brewers saw \$6.1 billion in revenue last year.

Industry growth also bucked another obstacle — hops prices spiked 20-80 percent because of shortage in the previous season's hops crop. The majority of hops consumed in this country are grown in the Pacific Northwest, with Europe being the second largest provider.

For Burnette, hops could be a way to keep the family tradition going, and one day bring additional income. Last year, he applied for a grant from the Agricultural Options Program, designed to create alternative cash crops for family farms. The grant money allowed him to install the irrigation and trellis system necessary for growing hops.

His farm has been designated a North Carolina Century Farm (which offers no tax benefits, only recognition) and has been home to apple orchards, cattle pastures, and gardens to supply basic family

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staples.

Today, the farm features blueberries and medicinal herbs, in addition to hops. Burnette renamed it "Hop'n Blueberry Farm," and dreams of a U-pick blueberry patch and a hops harvest party.

The hopyard rises from a gently sloping field with open views of the Craggy Mountains. Vines snake up 18-foot-high trellises, resembling from afar a giant pole bean setup. In early July, some of the vines have barely grown five feet, while others are more than 20 feet long and appear poised to consume their neighbors.

Burnette planted several different varieties and some are doing better than others. Centennial, which often takes longer to establish itself, is the runt of the litter, while the Cascade and Nugget varieties

are doing best. Chinook is holding its own.

Hops growing is so new to the region that farmers are still figuring out which varieties will thrive. Burnette based his picks on the preferences of Pisgah Brewing Company and local homebrewers.

Like other growers new to the crop, Burnette is learning how to correctly train the vines, how to prune them to maximize production, how to keep the pests away, and when to harvest.

"A couple of years ago, I didn't even know what a hop looked like," he said.

After he harvests this year, he'll have to figure out how to make his crop more accessible to brewers.

Freshly picked hops are fine for specialty beers such as "harvest ales," but they must be

used within 24 hours. Hops are typically dried for preservation and then vacuum packed and frozen for efficient storage and shipping. Sometimes, they are converted into a pellet form for easy use and storage.

The Madison County Cooperative Extension service has a dryer for herbs that will suffice, but a pelletizing machine and other equipment are expensive.

That could be where a regional hops grower cooperative may help, said Chris Reedy, a Buncombe County homebrewer who has been nurturing two hops plants for 10 years.

Reedy, who is helping spearhead the coop effort, said one recent meeting on growing hops attracted 150 participants, and another attracted 40-50 people. Nobody has reliable

figures on how much hops is being grown in Western North Carolina, so he recently sent out a survey.

What he does know is that hobby growers like himself have been successful for years, and that could translate to a viable commercial crop.

"I'm hoping it can follow along with Asheville being the number one beer city," he said, referring to the city's recent designation in an online voting poll as "Beer City USA." Western North Carolina is home to eight microbreweries.

"It could be a cottage industry, or maybe even something bigger," he said.

HOPS FARM TOUR

Featuring tours of Landfair Farm (Weaverville) and Hop'n Blueberry Farm (Black Mountain), and a tour and tasting at Pisgah Brewery

9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

August 29

\$10 per car load

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