



food

the straight dish

Hopping along

Hops farming comes to WNC



PHOTOS BY ANNE FITTEN GLENN

By Anne Fitten Glenn

Cowzilla may be the only local hops lover who didn't make an appearance at the inaugural Hops Farm Tour.

The huge feral cow, christened Cowzilla by Julie Jensen, co-owner of Echo View at Landfair Farm in Weaverville, may have been intimidated by the more than 100 growers, home brewers and beer lovers who converged on the farm to learn all about hops — from planting to maintenance to harvesting to selling.

While Cowzilla didn't get a chance to amble through Jensen's fields and snatch a few bites before disappearing back into the woods, the rest of us got to examine and sniff the hops, which may be tasty to a wild cow, but need brewing before they're palatable for humans.

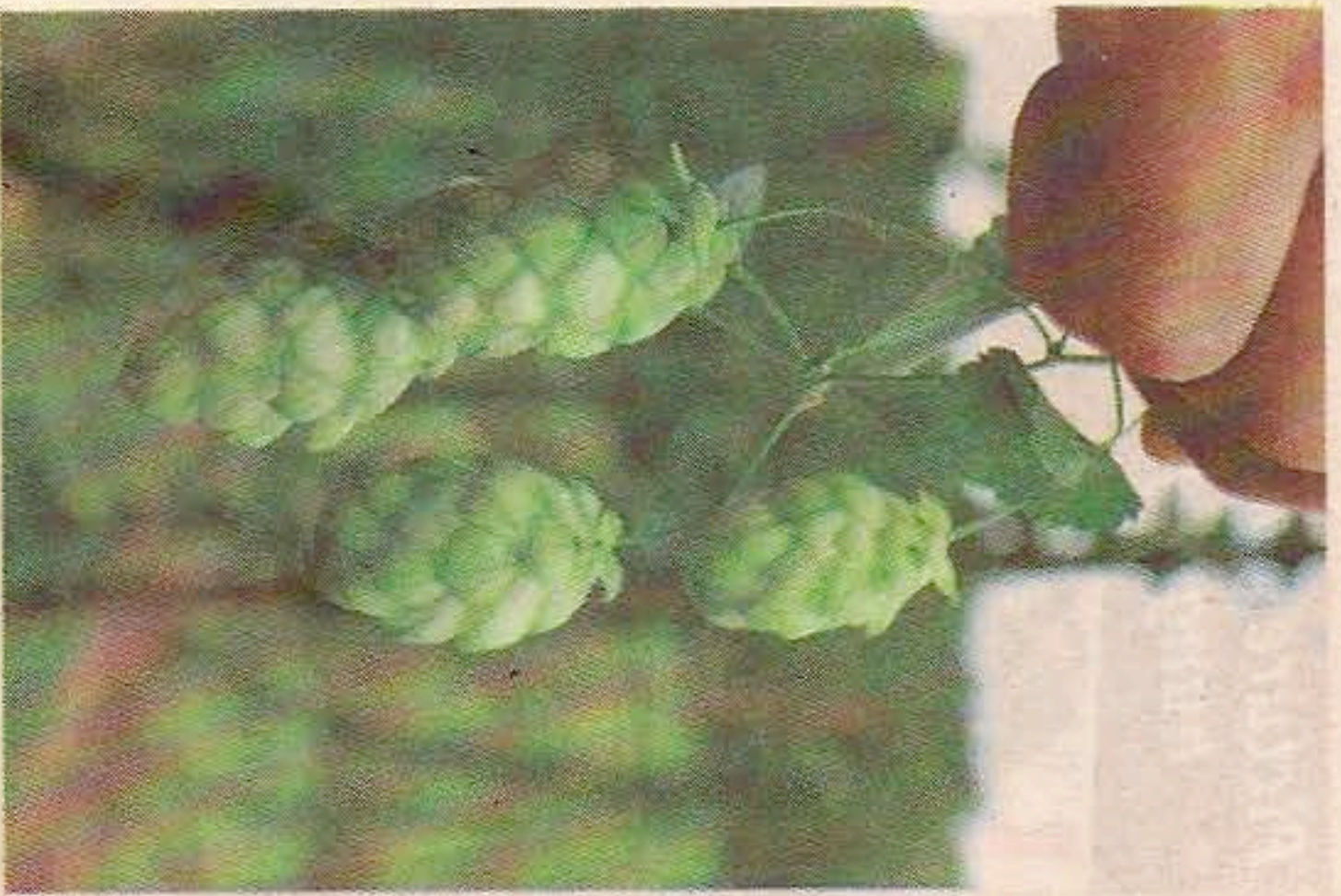
At first glance, hops bines look like spindly grape vines, except the clusters of flowery green cones hiding among their leaves are feathery and light — not grapelike at all. (Hops grow on bines, not vines. Bines don't have tendrils. Vines do). The bines grow up high trellises so the sun can reach as much of the bine as possible. When dried, they turn yellowish-green and smell strongly of freshly brewed beer (they're also often mashed into pellets for brewing).

The North Carolina Cooperative Extension hosted the Hops Farm Tour on a Saturday in late August. After the stop at Echo View, the daylong tour continued with a visit to Van Burnette's Hop'N Blueberry Farm in Black Mountain and ended with a beer tasting at Pisgah Brewing Company, North Carolina's first certified organic brewery.

Jensen and Burnette are among a number of area farmers experimenting with what could become a new cash crop in Western North Carolina: hops.

Why is the flowering perennial suddenly getting so much attention? In 2007, a worldwide hops shortage stymied brewers. The problem occurred when farmers in the Pacific Northwest, the world's leading hops production area, cut back on plantings after a time of oversupply, during which they had produced more hops than they could sell.

The shortage was particularly hard for craft brewers: At the height of the shortfall, the price for a pound of hops more than doubled to \$20 or more per pound. While the hops shortage is basically over, growers have begun warding off future problems by planting more. Since perennial hops take about three years to fully mature, brewers should have their choice of hops at com-



specialist with North Carolina State University, told the Hops Tour participants. "It's an experimental crop here."

Jensen, a descendent of pub owners and home brewers, planted 100 hops rhizomes (plant stems that shoot out roots) as an experiment two years ago. Only 23 of those sprouted, but she didn't give up. This year, Jensen put 1,300 rhizomes in the ground — six different varieties of hops. While most of those plants produced bines, she was only able to harvest about a pound of dried hops.

Asked what she plans to do with her hops, Jensen replies: "Home brew. Make an IPA, probably."

Burnette was able to harvest about 2.5 pounds of dried hops from his 135 year-old bines. He says a second harvest might get him another 6 ounces.

"Hops growing is still experimental in this part of the country. I didn't want to go too far out on a limb. That's why I only planted on one-tenth of an acre," Burnette says.

He credits a \$6,000 WNC AgOptions Grant through the state's Tobacco Trust Fund with helping him transition his cattle farm to hops and blueberry production.

Burnette plans to sell some of his hops to Alex Buerckholtz, owner of Hops & Vines home brewing and wine shop in West Asheville. Buerckholtz says he'll resell some of the hops and use the rest to make a home brew or two.

Burnette hopes that his bines will produce up to 100 pounds of hops next year. If that happens, and if he can keep potential diseases in check, he'll plant more the following year. Neither Burnette nor Jensen has had problems with disease or predators (Cowzilla excepted) thus far. But both say they worry about spider mites and downy mildew, historic enemies of hops.

Both farmers emphasize that growing hops is not for anyone who's scared by hard physical labor. As a perennial, the first year of planting, trellising and tending hops requires lots of work. Plus, the cones typically are harvested by hand.

"I know every one of my 1,300 hops plants," Jensen says. "It's been a lot of fun, but more labor intensive than I thought. I'm one of those crazy people who wants to grow organic hops and harvest them by hand."

Jensen employs five helpers on her farm. Burnette is on his own at his family farm (he's the seventh generation to live on his land).

When some of the growers on the Farm Tour saw how "pretty" Burnette's hops are, they asked what he was doing.

"Other than putting about 400 hours into taking care of them, I don't really know," he replied.

Jensen's goal is to produce a hardy mountain version by combining the hardy "wild" hops that have survived in the region for years with whichever Northwest varieties thrive best here. So far, the Chinook variety seems to be performing best for her, while the Nugget and Cascade varieties have been the best producers.

While there aren't yet a whole lot of locally grown hops to go around, Pisgah Brewing Company plans to brew small batches of beer with locally grown hops next year.

"Pisgah wants fresh, organic hops, so it'll be a symbiotic relationship," Burnette says. "I won't have to dry or package them. I can just dump the hops from a wheelbarrow into a bucket and drive them five miles down the road to Pisgah." David Quinn, Pisgah co-owner, adds: "If hops are local, we can spend a little more per pound because we don't have to pay for shipping — which is an environmental plus as well."

Jensen promises her prices will be competitive for organic hops. Burnette says the same, though

he notes that prices have fluctuated so much over the past few years, he doesn't know what the going price will be once he actually has decent production, a goal to which he's firmly committed.

Says Burnette, "I want to help set up hops as a bona fide alternative crop in Western North Carolina." ❧

Arne Fitten writes the Edgy Mama parenting column and Brevos News for Xpress and blogs at www.edgymama.com.

Hop to it

Local North Carolina Cooperative Extension agents can answer questions about getting started farming hops. In Buncombe, contact Melinda Roberts at 255-5522 or Jeanine Davis at 684-3562. Roberts organized the Hops Tour and says that while nothing's on the calendar yet, folks should check this Web site for information on future hops-related events: buncombe.ces.ncsu.edu/.

In the mean time, Burnette will be speaking about hops farming at the True Nature Country Fair in Barnardsville on Sept. 26 and 27, hosted by the Organic Growers School. For more information, visit www.organicgrowersschool.org.