

ALBERTA HOPYARD

Enthusiastic growers learn, tweak, expand

Sisters are trying to find the best hop varieties for their northern climate

BY MARY MACARTHUR
CAMROSE BUREAU

DARWELL, Alta. — Catherine Smith squeezes the green cone-shaped hops and listens to the sound.

The light, papery rustle means the plants are almost ready to harvest. If everything goes according to plan, the first batch of hops will be flavouring beer within days.

The Northern Girls Hopyard is the mostly northerly hopyard in North America and the only one in Alberta.

Sisters Karin Smith-Fargey and Catherine Smith say they have proved hops can grow hundreds of kilometres north of the hopyards in British Columbia and Washington.

There are still lots of questions to be answered about growing hops, which are used for adding flavour and aroma to beer.

The sisters don't know which of the five hop varieties growing in their 7-acre hopyard are the best for the area, nor do they know which



Sisters Karin Smith-Fargey and Catherine Smith own Northern Girls Hopyard near Darwell, Alta. It is the most northerly hopyard in North America and the only hopyard in Alberta. The pair are growing five varieties of hops to learn the best hops for the environment and what brewers are looking for. | MARY MACARTHUR PHOTOS

varieties Alberta's craft brewers prefer.

"We're really experimenting," said Smith-Fargey of Edmonton.

The sisters learned this year that hops don't like wind and grasshoppers are attracted to the tender new hop flowers and leaves.

Luckily, grasshoppers only ate the bottom leaves and flowers, and the southeast wind didn't last long.

The hopyard is planted in a pasture on a quarter section of land once owned by the women's family and is mostly protected by trees.

The sisters bought back the quarter section in 2010, planted fruit trees and wondered what else they could grow on their rolling field.

"We wanted to stay true to the agricultural heritage," said Fargey-Smith.

The idea for the hopyard began when Smith-Fargey's son spent time in the Gatineau region of Quebec, where hops are grown throughout the region.

"It was the seed of a thought that made sense," Smith said.

With the help of family and friends, the sisters chopped long larch poles from the nearby bush to use as braces for the wires that run 16 feet high across the hopyard. The hops were planted in the spring of 2013, and the hop vines wind their way up the paper cordage to the wires above.

"It's a unique crop. It's a different way of utilizing the land," said Smith, who lives in Calgary.

The sisters also liked the diversity of hops.

The hop plant produces more than just hops for beer. Chefs around the world also treasure the tender, white rhizomes that are dug out of the ground in spring.

As well, the extra rhizomes growing off the main hop plant can be split and sold as starter plants to other hop producers, while the vines, or bines, can be sold as decoration in the horticulture industry.

This spring, they shipped more than 100 rhizomes, or hops in a pot, to a brewery in Calgary to help establish a community of hop growers in that city.

"They went like hotcakes," said Smith-Fargey.

Like grapes, the flavour of the hops is a reflection of the local environment. The sisters said Alberta

brewers want to use their hops, but they are looking for a consistent product and a steady supply.

"Our purpose is to say it is doable," said Smith-Fargey, who would like to see more hopyards in the province to fill the growing demand for hops from the craft brewing industry.

"Our goal is to show the success of this venture for others producers who may be interested."

With no mentors, the pair learned by reading and trial and error.

Finding the right variety for the region is key. The sisters will plant another six varieties next year to find the ideal variety for the growing conditions and the brewers. Next year they will begin adding organic fertilizer to the drip irrigation to boost production.

Because they follow organic growing practices, the sisters had to learn what weight of paper to use to control weeds in the hopyard. The first paper was too light and didn't control the weeds. Heavier paper applied this spring seems to do a better job.

Hops are day length sensitive. They spend their energy growing vegetation before the summer solstice and set seed after the solstice at the end of June. However, the cones need to be mature and harvested before frost.

Hops are sold fresh (wet) to local brewers, but they can also be dried, which is an art in itself to ensure the volatile oils in the hop cones are not damaged.

The sisters plan to eventually build a oasthouse, or a drying shed, but are now using a homemade drying bed made from old screens that looks like a giant food dryer. It takes 10 to 12 hours of heat and air to dry the hops, which are then vacuum packed and shipped to brewers.

An average hopyard will yield 1,500 kilograms of wet hops per acre.

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ABOVE: Larch poles were cut out of the nearby bush to stake the hop vines. The hopyard has five varieties of hops on slightly less than one acre.



RIGHT: Hops are the female flowers of the hop plant and are used to flavour beer. The yellow lupulin inside the hop cone is what is used for flavouring.



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After two harvests, the sisters don't know what would be considered an average harvest of hops in their yard.

Recent changes to brewing regulations have encouraged dozens of small craft and microbreweries to open in the province. The supply of hops is tightly controlled with

most coming from British Columbia and Washington.

Brewers buy hops through forward contracts three or four years ahead of the year they are needed. Brewers are concerned that the growing demand for craft beer might result in a shortage of hops.

"We're stepping into that spot market. We will supply the gap,"

said Smith.

Maltsters, brewers and urban gardeners visited the hopyard this summer for a field day to learn about hop production and get a sense of the industry.

"It's just a really interesting crop that no one knows anything about," said Smith-Fargey.

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