



Hops in Virginia: Need-to-Know Information about the Industry

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Background: Hops were grown in Virginia even in the days of Thomas Jefferson, but production eventually shifted away from the east coast in favor of the Pacific Northwest. In past decades, commercial hop production was not substantial in Virginia. However, in recent years as the craft brewing industry surged, renewed interest in hops production led to a rapid increase in the number of hobby and commercial growers in the state. A fall 2014 survey showed approximately fifty growers in the Virginia, but to date several dozen more have been added to the ranks. Growers can be found in most regions of the state. Most growers sell their hops immediately after harvest as a niche product, but some sell their hops dried or in pelletized form.

Production and Management: Hop cones, the harvestable flowers from female plants, grow on vine-like “bines” which emerge each spring from a long-lived perennial crown. Bines are trained to grow clockwise vertically around twine or coir which is attached to an overhead trellis. Conventional producers often use tall trellises of 18-20’. In Virginia, some growers use a short trellis system which is around 12’ in height. Hobby growers may choose to train hops onto twine attached to the top of a pole, building, or another tall structure. Hops need well-drained soil, irrigation, and full sun. They require fertilization to support vegetative growth early in the season and production of hop cones during reproductive stages. After hopyard establishment, major chores include pruning shoots in early spring, stringing the trellis, training bines, controlling weeds, scouting for pests, irrigation, fertilization, harvest, and winter preparation. Diseases of concern in Virginia include hops downy mildew, powdery mildew, and viruses. Pests of concern in recent times include mites and Japanese beetles. The most popular variety for Virginia growers is Cascade, constituting nearly 70% of the state’s plants, followed by Chinook, Nugget, CTZ varieties, and others. Some growers have plantings of a number of less-common varieties.

Considerations for New Growers: Since hops are labor-intensive and many hops chores are done by hand in Virginia, even a yard of one acre is a large commitment. Virginia’s management practices, industry infrastructure, and marketing systems currently differ significantly from those employed in the major hops states. Beginners may choose to start with a few rows or a fraction of an acre, as this allows for future adjustments to trellis design, layout, or variety selection. Since most growers currently market their own hops, growers who start with small yards can plan future growth to align with increasing marketing capacity over time.

Harvest and Marketing: Yield may be insignificant in the first year after establishment, but production increases as plants mature around their third year. Variety selection and management greatly influence yield. Virginia hops are often harvested by hand, although a few individuals have mechanized harvest. It may take up to an hour to hand-pick one pound of fresh hops. Some growers hold harvest parties as a form of agritourism. While some growers dry their hops and several have pelletizing equipment which enables greater marketing flexibility, most growers currently sell their hops to brewers immediately after harvest, as fresh hops are a niche product.

Industry Development: Virginia is home to the Old Dominion Hops Cooperative, a producer group which engages in industry promotion, networking, events, and education. Some growers are also involved in the Northeast Hops Alliance, Southern Appalachian Hops Guild, and local clubs and brewing groups. Beginning in 2014, Virginia and North Carolina faculty and stakeholders collaborated to hold a major annual hops conference.