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LIQUID ASSETS: THE HOPS PROJECT

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BY AMY HALORAN

The Cornell Fall Hops Conference on December 1 drew nearly 300 people to Morrisville, New York. Attendees were mostly from New York State, but people interested in craft brewing and hop growing came from as far as from Ontario, Canada, and St. Louis, Missouri.

The event, which was also the annual meeting of the Northeast Hops Alliance (NeHA), had a strong lineup of Vermont presenters. Heather Darby and Rosalie Madden spoke about different aspects of the Hops Project at the University of Vermont. With the help of a USDA grant, the research hop yard is exploring how to cultivate hops organically. State funds are helping investigate small-scale harvesting and processing equipment.

The Hops Project and NeHA are investigating how to rebuild the hops industry. The crop has a strong history in New York and Vermont, but production in the Pacific Northwest eclipsed the region over the last century. Historical knowledge of how to manage the crop has vanished.

researchers, growers and brewers are working to compile information on best practices, infrastructure and marketing, as well as to develop a support network for people interested in pursuing hops as a crop.

“How do we produce the highest quality hops in the Northeast?” Darby asked the crowded auditorium at SUNY Morrisville. “We don’t want brewers to buy local hops just because they’re local, but because it’s the best quality hops possible.”

The learning curve is steep, especially in terms of pest and disease control. Darby discussed how to start a hopyard, stressing the importance of prepping the soil, setting up and using irrigation, variety selection, scouting for and treating downy mildew. UVM Crops and Soils Technician Rosalie Madden dove further into the basics of hops production for growers and potential growers.

Interest in local hops has swelled with the local foods movement, and New York State’s Farm Brewery Law is getting all kinds of people—farmers, home brewers and even people seeking agricultural tax credits—curious about hops. The law grants licenses for producers using New York State products in their brews, and goes into effect January 2013. The Hops Project and NeHA, which was formed in 2001, are poised to serve this curiosity.

The group has chapters in New York and New England, and also Maryland, which stretches to cover a few hops growers in surrounding states.

Vermont grower Kris Anderson went to the Hops Conference at Morrisville. Anderson’s Addison hopyard is two-thirds of an acre and he’s expanding to a full acre this spring. UVM held its field day at his Addison Hop Farm this year, and he’s been working with the researchers at Extension on the Hops Project.

“I went to the conference because of the information on pest and fungal disease research,” he said. “Hops grow just fine here, but being able to produce the numbers you can get out west is tough.”

The numbers in question are figures that calculate qualities in hops that brewers seek, such as alpha and beta amylase, and also, sheer quantity. In the Pacific Northwest, the industry knows how to grow for yield and to meet the needs of brewer’s recipes.

Still, despite the challenges of growing hops in the Northeast, demand is big. Consumers want brews with local ingredients, and Anderson could have sold all 50 pounds of hops he grew last year twice over.

Mark Magiera, brewer at Bobcat Café and Brewery in Bristol, Vermont, has used Anderson’s hops in a number of different batches. His Cascade hops, Magiera said, have a very Vermont terroir, and taste of lemon citrus or lemongrass. This differs from Cascade hops grown in the Northwest, and others grown in England that he’s used. Capturing local flavors matters to him as a brewer, and is in keeping with the direction of the chefs at Bobcat.

Magiera has worked with NeHA and the UVM Extension as brewery advisor, testing the hops produced. He attended the conference for the past two years, but couldn’t make this one because of prior commitments. One thing he’s enjoyed at the conferences is face-to-face contact with growers.

Vermont has about 30 growers, and perhaps 10 of these are growing commercially. Meeting producers helps foster the connections that make local ingredients mean more than just taste. Such connections broaden the scope of a standard buyer/producer relationship, as demonstrated by a benefit batch he produced last summer.

“I worked with UVM to make Flood Suds, a Witbier, which is a Belgian White-style beer,” said Magiera. “All the wheat, barley and hops were grown in Vermont.”

And all the profits from the beer went to farmers hit by Tropical Storm Irene.

If this story piques your curiosity about hops, you might like to attend the UVM Extension’s Winter Hop Conference, which takes place February 22 at The Essex. Uvm.edu/Extension/Cropsoil/Hops.

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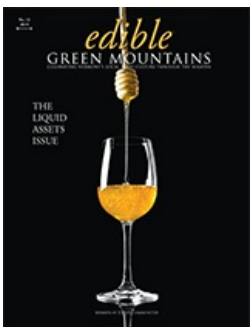
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