



Primary Plus

A SECTION TARGETTED AT FARMER-DIRECTED PROCESSING, RETAILING AND PRODUCT PROMOTION

Ontario-grown hops coming to a brew near you

Trent Hills - By now fresh craft beer made from Ontario hops harvested this year could be hitting the shelves of your favorite local watering hole.

If you're in the Ottawa area, some will be made from hops harvested on a warm September day, at a yard here just east of Campbellford, not far from the banks of the Trent River.

Here at Lot 17 on this first decent day of September two brewers, two hops growers and assorted family members have gathered. The day's job? The harvesting of 460 plus bines grown and tended lovingly by Fred and Loraine Thomson, their son Adam and his wife Stephanie.

Lot 17 is small as hops yards go; but the work keeps retired Agricore rep Fred Thomson thinking, experimenting and innovating. Since 2011 he and son Adam have been growing and expanding this yard, experimenting with everything from varieties to soil treatment, bine management to pest control.

"There's a certain amount of 'art,' to growing hops," Thomson says.

"One of my key learnings this year is how to pick the right time to prune them, and how to prune them," he says explaining that the bine should reach the 16' top of the coir by the summer equinox.

"Ours didn't do that and that was my fault," he says, admitting to being a little over aggressive with the knife.



BY SUZANNE ATKINSON
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"They didn't like that."

"Hops, because it's a re-emerging crop, there are a lot of things to relearn," he says, explaining that under ideal conditions they can grow 6' to 1' a day.

Hops, Thomson says, are resilient; they over-winter well. But they are susceptible to all manner of disease and insect which can ruin the fragile hop cones, and as that cone is developing, "they are heavy drinkers."

Most recently though the Thomsons's journey to learn more about the business of hops saw them invite Rob Brennan in for the harvest.

Brennan, of Old 4th Hop Yard at Williamstown, has recently imported the province's first hops harvester; new technology which takes most of the manual labour, out of this job.

HopsHarvester.com's hop harvester works very much like a stationary combine. Bines laden (hopefully) with mature hops are fed on a conveyor into the back of the machine, through a patent-pending rotor bar. The heavier wet hops fall onto a conveyor belt and are filtered out the side to a con-



Fred Thomson with hops growing at his Lot 17 hop yard

tainer while the lighter-weight stripped vines and leaves are segregated on an upper conveyor and belted out the front where they are gathered for later destruction.

"If you're going to grow at all," says Brennan, "eventually you're going to have to mechanize."

Because as hops growers the province over have learned, one hops harvesting party is enough.

"Nobody has that many friends," says Brennan.

Hops growing is an emerging industry here in Ontario. Approximately 35 growers are ramping up production

with Ontario's hop acreage now at about 60 acres. The province still imports about 550 kg annually. That's \$7 million of product which could be grown in Ontario, says OMAFRA's latest report on the crop.

Still, the province's acreage has gone up by 300 per cent since 2009, with the Thomsons hoping to quadruple the size of their yard in the next four years, depending on Adam's military postings.

"It's plenty for me to handle in the day to day by myself."

Terroir, Thomson, says is important as Lot 17 has worked with Dominion City Brewery in developing a special craft brew.

"If you can put up the quality, if you can put up the product...in a format the brewer can use, there is no end of demand for this product. We aren't even scratching the surface," he says.

"In my 40 plus years of being involved in agriculture I don't think I've ever seen a crop that has the potential this one has."

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