

Iowa's newest hops farm harvesting first crop

SOLON, Iowa (AP) — Iowa's newest and largest hops farm is harvesting its first commercial crop that's already supplying local craft brewers around the region.

The Buck Creek Hops farm, which is near Iowa City, planted an estimated 25,000 plants on 25 acres this spring, the Iowa City Press-Citizen reported.

Buck Creek owner Mark

Pattison expects to harvest about 1,000 pounds of hops this year, but that's just a fraction of what he and his partners hope to grow in the coming seasons. They have planted seven varieties, with four currently available: Cascade, Chinook, Columbus and Nugget.

"It's our first year and a small crop," Pattison said. "We'll be more at full production next year and the year

after. It takes a hop plant three years to mature. The first year is mainly just getting the roots started, and you hope to get some crop."

Buck Creek has invited brewers to hand pick their own hops this year. Pattison said it's beneficial for them in creating batches of "wet hops" beer, using the cones straight off the vine before they're processed and dried.

Big Grove Brewery typically uses hops from the Pacific Northwest, where the majority of the nation's hops originate, in their core portfolio beers, but partner with local growers in the fall for their harvest beers. Big Grove said that this year, it's exclusively using fresh-picked hops from Buck Creek.

Head brewer Bill Heinrich said the brewery hopes to partner

with Buck Creek to create a year-round beer featuring Iowa hops.

Hops prices have soared in recent years amid a craft brewing boom, prompting many to try and cash in by growing hops commercially, Heinrich said. But what could set Buck Creek apart from its competitors in the long run is the up-front investment Pattison and his team have put in to estab-

lish a larger operation with automated equipment, he said.

"The more I watch him do it, and the more we start to work with them, I think he has a better feel for what it's going to take to make a successful long-term project instead of just a short-term windfall," Heinrich said. "I'm really hoping he does well; I think he's going to be a good partner moving forward."

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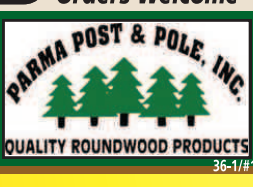
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