



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

Hops are cut in preparation for harvest. Craft brewers are funding public hop breeding under a program administered by USDA.

Craft brewers aim to revive public hop breeding

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

Craft brewers hope to give private hop breeders some more competition by funding a USDA-administered public breeding program based in Oregon.

The goal is to develop new public hop cultivars that are resistant to common fungal diseases and can be cultivated without licensing agreements by farmers in the Northwest and elsewhere.

In recent years, the trend has increasingly been for new varieties to be patented by private breeders, said Michelle Palacios, administrator of the Oregon Hop Commission.

"We're seeing the public varieties become less and less competitive," Palacios said.

Private breeders often want to closely control distribution of their hop cultivars, so their agreements with farmers are similar to contract production, said Fred Geschwill, a farmer near Woodburn, Ore., and president of the Hop Research Council.

"Their licensing agreements are very tight," Geschwill said. "I grow it, give it back to them, then they sell it to the marketplace."

Private breeders can better regulate supply and demand under this scenario, but farmers have less control over planting decisions and brewers have fewer suppliers competing for their business, he said.

While growers can still turn to traditional public cultivars, some of them have been losing their resistance to powdery mildew and other diseases over time.

For example, Cascade aroma hops have long been an industry staple but now they're getting "long in the tooth," said Chuck Skypeck, technical brewing projects manager with the Brewers Association, which will contribute an undisclosed sum to public breeding over five years.

"You can't live on your good graces forever. You need to keep things in the pipeline," said Skypeck.

As public funding for hop breeding has dried up in recent decades, the U.S. brewing industry has seen a resurgence — from fewer than 100 breweries in the 1970s, the number is expected to reach 6,000 by

the end of 2017, he said.

"That landscape has changed," he said.

Craft breweries don't just need hops to impart bitterness, they rely on aroma varieties to create unique flavors that differentiate their brands, Skypeck said.

Unless they have desirable agronomic qualities and disease resistance, though, even the tastiest hops won't gain traction on the farm, he said.

There currently isn't a reliable mechanism for new hop varieties to be tested by brewers and growers, Skypeck said.

Aside from providing funding to USDA for breeding, the Brewers Association plans to form an advisor panel with members from both industries to guide research, he said. Trials of potential cultivars will also be studied in breweries and on farms.

"There are usually a lot more misses than there are hits," Skypeck said of the breeding process.

Money from the Brewers Association will pay for one post-doctoral breeder position as well as a technician, said Ryan Hayes, a geneticist with USDA's Agricultural Research Service. The hiring process has already begun for the post-doctoral position.

Once the initial five-year deal with USDA expires, the Brewers Association can enter into another agreement with the agency, he said.

Cultivars suited to moist Western Oregon may also be successful in New York and other regions where hop production is seeing a revival, said Geschwill.

As long as they source a certain portion of their ingredients from within New York, for example, farmers in that state can launch on-site breweries, he said.

Meet the makers of Idaho's biggest potatoes

By **JOHN O'CONNELL**
Capital Press

WEISER, Idaho — Chris and Sharolyn Schofield have carved a unique niche in the art world — making colossal sculptures of Idaho Russet Burbank potatoes.

Though the Weiser couple has thus far avoided the spotlight, their creations are recognized nationwide.

Tens of thousands of on-lookers witness the dropping of their giant, glowing potato in downtown Boise each New Year's Eve. And the 6-ton spud they created for the Idaho Potato Commission's Great Big Idaho Potato Truck has traveled about 150,000 miles, visiting 7,200 cities while promoting the Idaho brand.

The Schofields — founders of Schofield Design — are building their fourth giant potato. It is a replacement for the IPC's original oversized traveling tuber. The IPC introduced the truck in 2011 to celebrate its 75th anniversary, planning on a single tour but keeping it on the road ever since, based on its popularity.

IPC President and CEO Frank Muir initially worried the truck would be "hokey" if the potato wasn't convincing. Instead, Muir believes it's become part of "American pop culture." He said people often drive hours for the chance to see the truck.

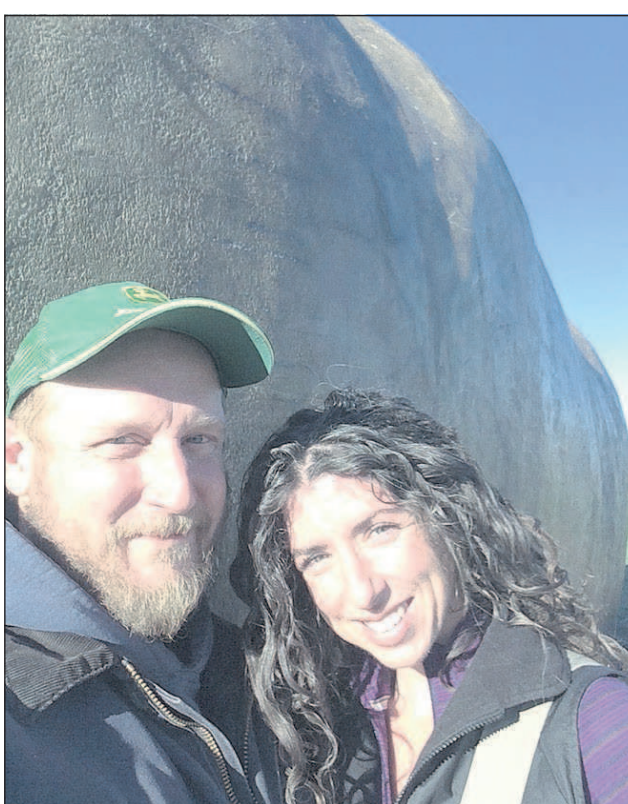
"One of the testaments to their ability to create authentic art is that the No. 1 question wherever the truck drives is, 'Is it real?'" Muir said. "The fact that people would even think a 12,000-pound potato is real is amazing."

Sharolyn is a certified structural welder. Chris grew up in the construction trade and has taken sculpting classes. He's experienced in building indoor climbing walls and used a similar construction approach to make IPC's first potato. The Schofields took the best features from several large Idaho spuds Muir sent them to make a composite design. Based on their sketch, they fabricated metal ribs, which they welded together and covered with plywood, and then foam, which Chris cut into a potato shape. They then covered the exterior with a thin layer of polymerized concrete. They developed a special-



Courtesy of Sharolyn Schofield

Chris and Sharolyn Schofield created a 6-ton spud for the Idaho Potato Commission's Great Big Idaho Potato Truck. It has traveled about 150,000 miles, visiting 7,200 cities.



Courtesy of Sharolyn Schofield

Chris and Sharolyn Schofield in front of the giant potato they built for the Idaho Potato Commission's Great Big Idaho Potato Truck. The Weiser, Idaho, couple is building a replacement potato for the truck.

ized trough to make the russet "skin," used concrete dye for color and protected the sculpture with a sealant.

"We're pretty critical of our projects," Sharolyn said. "We want things to look just right."

A hidden door at the front of the potato allows the truck crew to access the interior for storage.

Over the years, the potato has sustained damage from overhanging branches, frequent cracks caused by road

vibrations and even boot prints made by NASA astronauts who stood on it during a parade. The Schofields made a repair kit and trained the truck's crew to make on-the-road fixes. They give the potato a major touch-up following each national trek.

"In the beginning, it was just another job, but it's been six years and it's got a special place in our family," Chris said. "We have our heart and soul in this one, and when we see it go, we're sad."

For the New Year's Eve Potato drop, the Schofields created a low-budget foam model, which they later replaced with a fiberglass version for greater longevity.

IPC's next potato will also be made of fiberglass, cutting out about half the weight.

They're taking measurements from the original potato so the new spud will fit perfectly into a square frame, mounted on springs, that Sharolyn designed and welded to affix the spud to the truck's flatbed. Special LED lighting on the truck will illuminate the new spud during night parades. The potato should be finished by March, in time for the truck's next tour.

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