



Aliya Hall/For the Capital Press
Phil Hibler with his hop plants. Hibler started growing hops as part of his physical therapy after he broke his neck.

Farmer grows hops, builds pickers

By ALIYA HALL
For the Capital Press

CROW, Ore. — Phil Hibler had been interested in hop production from a young age, but it wasn't until after he recovered from a neck injury that he decided to pursue it as a business venture.

"I was using (hop production) as physical therapy after I broke my neck as something to get me back into real life," Hibler said. "I was always intrigued by (hops). It's a fun way of meeting new people. I like to try new things; repetition is boring."

It's been three years since Hibler established his company, Little Hill Hops. As a small producer, Hibler is working to supply local breweries with fresh hops to fill an immediate need. Little Hill Hops also pelletizes and vacuum seals its hops and offers these services to other hop farmers.

Hibler wants to be involved in the manufacturing process as well, having built his own hop picker from a concept that the University of Vermont shared

online. He plans on building more and selling them on contract to other small hop producers.

Having engineered telescopes before his injury, Hibler was up to the challenge.

"If there was a test to take for astronomy or different physics, I could ace it, I'm pretty sure," he said.

The initial machine took three years to build, due to Hibler's perfecting of it. He said that now, however, to build the same machine, it would take around 40 hours.

"We built it several different times beginning to end," Hibler said. "The thing about our machine is it does three vines a minute, and that's comparable to a machine much, much bigger, (and) much more expensive."

The interest in Little Hill Hops from investors came quickly. One of the doctors that Hibler was referred to, Jay Chappell, brought in his family, as well as his friend Jeff Paulsen, who is also a colleague. Little Hill Hops has since had two more rounds of investors, and

sells its hops exclusively to Coldfire Brewery in Eugene, Ore., which has been involved from the beginning.

"It just kind of clicked," Chappell said. "When Phil first got me and my family excited we thought, 'Oh, let's grow these things.' But the more we talked with the Hughes brothers at Coldfire the more we realized, 'Wait, there's a lot more to it than that.' They want a pelletized product that has to be pelletized a certain way."

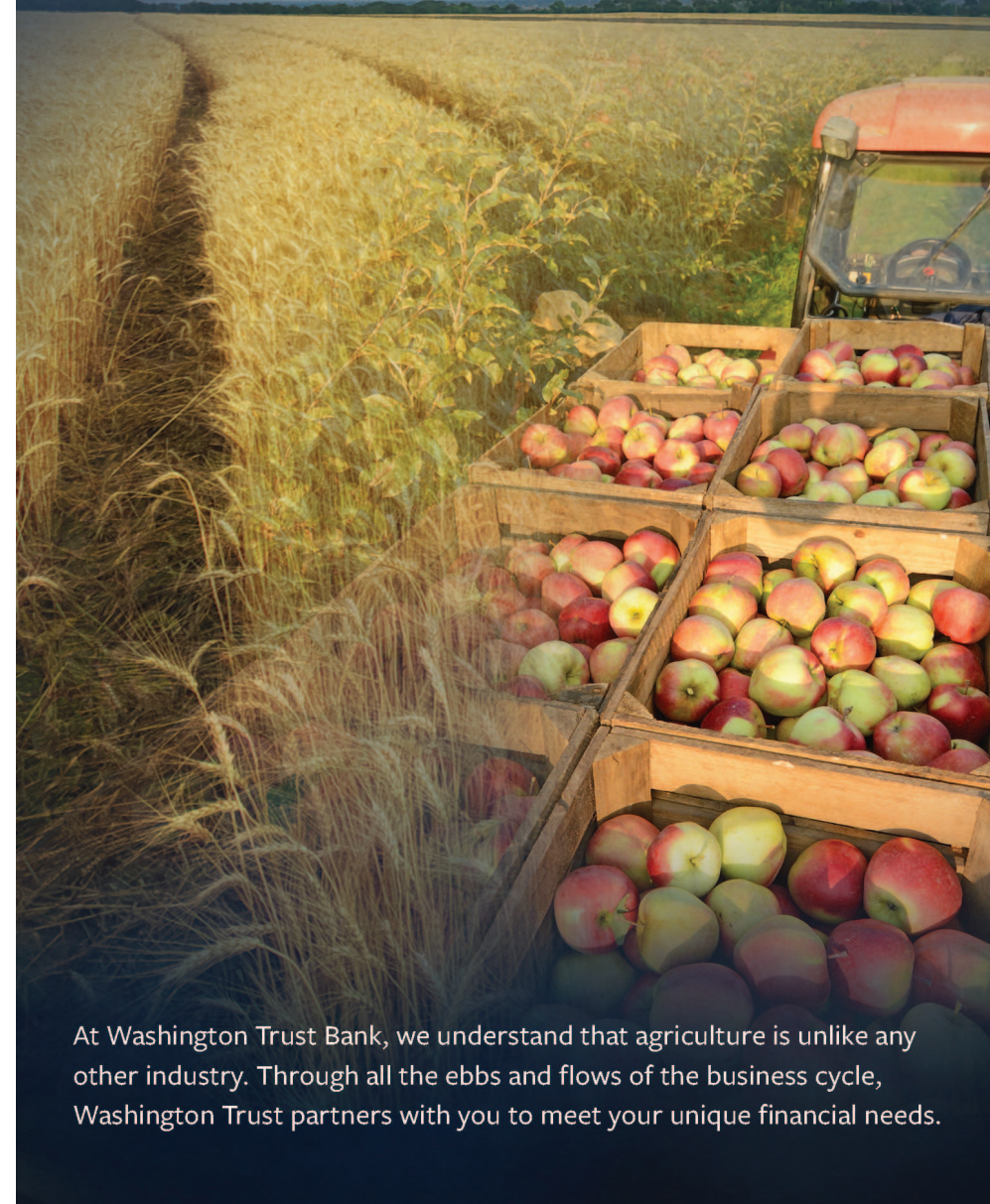
Hibler's pelletizing equipment is from Lawson Mills Biomass Solutions and it processes at a lower temperature, which removes fear of the hops being burned during the process. Little Hill Hops charges \$2 per pound for the basic service, and \$2.75 if a client adds the packaging service.

Chappell said it is "a two-phase business." In late August through October the company will focus on growing the hops and offering pelletizing services for local brewers, and then in winter Hibler will manufacture pickers on contract.



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