

HOPS AT HOME

Tilley brothers cater to home brewers

NATE TILLEY, TOBIAS SCHOCK
AND MATT LEEF OF AGRARIAN ALES

I like farms and I like beer. What could be better, on a sunny evening in mid-May, than a visit to Agrarian Ales? Brothers Ben and Nate Tilley set up a brew house in an old dairy barn on the family's organic farm, just west of the Coburg Hills. Ben senior and his wife Debbie grow chilis and sell them at the Corvallis and Lane County farmers markets. You'll recognize the Crossroads Farm stand — it's the one where, later in summer, peppers will be fragrantly roasting in a rotating drum.

They sell hop plants, too, and that's why I went out to the farm. As home brewing becomes ever more popular, hop vines are showing up in back yards. Hop plants even appeared outside grocery stores this spring. When something goes mainstream in the garden world and I don't know anything about it, it's time to get curious.

The Tilley brothers, with farmhand Matt Leef, grow 14 varieties of hops using organic methods. They began planting eight years ago, with two varieties. One was the now-famous Cascade hop developed at OSU in the 1980s, in a program that selected for disease resistance, yield and flavor profile, as well as "bittering" power. When their first hops began to yield, Agrarian began brewing, and the ales that brewmaster Tobias Schock conjures up in the barn are made using only hops — and all the hops — grown in their own hop yards. That's why you won't find IPAs on the menu here: They take a whole lot of hops. But Agrarian makes some fine hop-driven brews, such as the Remembrance Belgene I sampled.

Heading out to the nearby hop yard, we waded through a lovely cover crop of barley and crimson clover to get up

close and personal with some husky looking vines of Chinook and Willamette varieties. The Chinooks were particularly robust with big, deep-green leaves. "Chinook hops bear large, elongated cones," Schock said, "and they are more robust in flavor, too — more potent and higher in acid" than other varieties. Hop cones are the leafy fruit of a perennial, twining vine that can make 16 to 20 feet of vertical growth before dying back to the roots each winter. At Agrarian they are supported on trellises about 13 feet high: Vertical posts support horizontal top and ground cables between which twine is zig-zagged up and down, with the bottom of a V just above each plant crown. Six shoots per crown will be selected and directed up the V, three per side. Once they engage with the twine, the vines twist up it by themselves.

Hops need sun. The vines are planted 3 feet apart in rows, with 10 feet between rows. What's the best time to plant hops? "If your starts are sections of rhizome, March, if you get a decent break in the weather," Leef said. "You get more root growth when the weather is cool." If you buy rooted rhizomes in pots, however, they should take off any time during the growing season. The plants work on root development most of their first year and begin to yield the second. By the third year, a hop plant that's growing well should be in full production: 1-2 pounds per plant for a commercial yard, less with organic methods. A hop vine can live as long as 75 years, although some people claim production may peak at 15-20 years, Ben Tilley said.

Once well established, a hop plant produces a lot of shoots. As in any hop yard, mildew is a concern at Agrarian,

and the first growth of spring is burned off in order to push back growth for a few weeks until drier weather is likely. Burning also kills weeds. Once the shoots reach about 2 feet, they are trained to the twine and all the extra shoots are cut away to improve air circulation. With the same goal, leaves are stripped off the lower 2 feet or so. Schock said they also spray a rotation of two mildew controls to raise pH on the leaf surface to inhibit mildew growth and to introduce bacteria that break down mildew spores.

The cones are borne in clusters on side shoots that emerge from leaf axils above the lower 4 or 5 feet of vine. They'll be ready to harvest beginning around the end of August. It's a matter of taste what level of ripeness to go for. "The hops have a brighter profile when young," Nate Tilley told me. The harvest here is scheduled for Labor Day weekend and the weekend before, and involves about 150 pickers.

"Centennial, Cascade and Willamette come first, with Mount Hood and Crystals last," he said. "We cut through the string, top and bottom, and carry the whole vines into the barn, where clusters are cut off and sorted into individual cones." The hops are then dried and baled, with the whole process ending the second week in September.

Important as hops are to the brew, Nate Tilley told me, "It's the chilis and various grains that drive the main flavors." The Tilleys get corn from Lonesome Whistle Farm, wheat and barley from Camas Country Mills, buckwheat from Activation Seeds — all of them local. The chilis come from their own fields. ■

Rachel Foster of Eugene is a writer and garden consultant. She can be reached at rfoster@efn.org.



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