

Hoppin' Up To The Challenge

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BROADWAY - To hear David Clark tell it, there's a reason Benedictine monks cultivated hops plants for centuries. There's a ritual and rhythm to the long, quiet hours of solitude spent tending to a fussy, temperamental plant that holds the key to balancing the bitter in world-class beer.

As Clark squats near a young plant in his 1.3-acre hops yard, one of the biggest in the Shenandoah Valley, he inspects the leaves for signs of bugs - the good and bad kind.

"We're on the lookout for things like two-spotted spider mites and potato leafhoppers," Clark said of his first-year plants. "Aphids, too, but there are beneficial aphids as well as the kind that cause us problems."

Clark is the owner of 7 Hollows Farm, at 2072 Orkney Spring Road, about 15 miles northwest of Broadway, and this is his first season attempting hops.

"When I first bought the farm in 2011, I did hay," he said. "But I wanted something that was more hands on. I wanted a challenge."

The journey to a commercial-density hops yard has proven just that.

Clark tapped hops-growing veteran Robert Andrews as a consultant for his new venture.

"Rob's been a big help because I tend to over think things," Clark said. "Wondering if I'm doing things right or if I'm doing enough."

Andrews believes the secret to successful hops growing boils down to patience.

"Sometimes, I tell him just to wait it out. Give the plants enough time to work it out," Andrews said. "It's a roll of the dice, but it's worked well for Dave so far."

A fan of well-crafted beers, Clark considered opening a brewery but found that idea had already taken root in the area.

"I wondered how I could bring something new to the market but still be part of it," he said.

Clark began researching what was involved in growing hops that led him to hiring Andrews. With Andrews' expertise, months of research and weeks of backbreaking work, Clark had a 56-pole, 1,200 plant trellis system that stretched out across the former hay field.

Hops plants are perennials and take about four years to mature with harvests in late summer.

"This summer will be our first harvest and Rob's told me to be patient," Clark said. "We'll just see how this year turns out. We're expecting some buds to harvest; we're just not exactly sure how many yet. So far, so good, though."

Clark's looking to fill a void in the local fresh, or wet, hops market. When brewers use fresh hops in their beer, the taste is usually brighter and more floral than the more traditional dried hops.

But the key, he said, is quick turn around.

"When you're dealing with fresh hops, you need to get them to your local brewery within 48 hours or the quality will start to deteriorate," Clark said.

As his first growing season stretches on, he is still immersing himself in research and looking to work with local agricultural extension offices, all in hopes of being part of a new movement in quality, hyper local brewing and supplies.

"When we get to the point that we can supply good, quality hops to these local brewers, it's my hope that we get more people in the state interested in growing and cultivating a hops revival in Virginia."

For more information about 7 Hollows Farm, visit www.7hollowsfarm.com

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Caption: David Clark, owner of 7 Hollows Farm at 2072 Orkney Spring Road south of Basye, is looking to fill a void in the local hops market. This year marks his first attempt to harvest the temperamental plant. (Photos by Megan Applegate / DN-R) David Clark, owner at 7 Hollows Farm, is growing hops at his farm 15 miles northwest of Broadway. IMG>http://www.dnronline.com/files/uploads/article_images/53ae55b7-f00c-4f6e-950d-4fef0a950c5b/53ae55f9-b798-4225-8a62-53e30a950c5b.jpg p/> http://www.dnronline.com/files/uploads/article_images/53ae55b7-f00c-4f6e-950d-4fef0a950c5b/53ae561e-d9c8-49f2-93de-53e40a950c5b.jpg /IMG>

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