ARhopsharvest

Hops harvest: “It’s like a big family”

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Land Locked Hops owners Nick Reutter and Ross Sorensen look forward to August every year. Not because another year of school is starting, but because it’s time to harvest their hops in rural Loda.

Growing hops is a multiyear process, and the crop Reutter and Sorensen were harvesting on a Saturday in August was planted two years ago. That’s because hops are perennials and have a lifespan of 20 or more years.

Harvesting hops is an all hands on deck process and starts with cutting down the vines which grow up ropes strung between poles. To accomplish this, the crew uses a hedge trimmer, cutting the individual ropes at the bottom and then at the top. After the ropes and plants are cut and collected onto the hayrack, they are then taken to the harvester. Each individual vine, rope and all, are then fed into the harvester which separates the hops cones from the ropes, vines and leaves.

Since hops cones are more than 50% water, they must be dried before heading to the hammer mill where they are made into pellets. The final product, pellets, are then sold by the pound.

All of this makes harvest more than a two-man job, and Land Locked Hops welcomes extra company and assistance.

“It’s like a big family,” explained Sorensen. “Brewers, hops growers, neighbors, family members and friends all come to harvest.”

For Land Locked Hops, building relationships with brewers is an essential part of their business.

“It’s 100% building relationships with brewers,” said Sorensen. “Getting in front of people and showing them how much work this is. Letting them see the operation. Most people don’t get to smell hops one minute old. They’re very fresh.”

One particular brewer, Keg Grove Brewing Company in Bloomington, came to watch the harvest of Mackinac hops. Keg Grove uses these hops in some of their beers because of their tropical and citrus qualities.

To maintain a high-quality end product, mitigating growing challenges is also important to Reutter and Sorensen. Some steps they have taken include installing drip irrigation, planting cover crops in between the rows and addressing pests, as necessary.

“Is there ever a perfect growing year?,” asked Sorensen. “We make do just like everybody else and we’re constantly evolving to make it better.”

As Reutter and Sorensen both have full-time, off-farm jobs, growing hops for them is a passion on the side. It all began back in 2016 when the business partners and friends purchased 80 acres of land. While they converted most of the land into wildlife habitat through USDA conservation programs, they saved about 5 acres devoted to hops.

While hops are typically grown in the Pacific Northwest, it’s needless to say that passion, curiosity and hard work have made a home for this unique crop in central Illinois.

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Outstanding In Their Field

It amazes me how much easier it is to learn new things today than it was when I was young. Using the computer to access the internet gives me vast amounts of instantaneous information that is only limited by my amount of time to do research. With just an hour to go until bedtime and an article to write, I find myself delving into all the facets of sunflower production.

For about the 5th time in my life I have planted a decent sized patch of sunflowers. This time they are right in front of the house on the farm. More than once this summer I have seen vehicles stop on the road and the occupants exit to take photos of the bright yellow flowers. The birds and the bees enjoy them, too.

The sunflower is one of the few crop species native to the Americas’. Commercial production in the U.S. was miniscule, 6,000 acres, in 1966. By the middle 1980’s, production rose to around a million acres per year with U.S. growers raising almost 20% of world production. Farmers in the U.S. currently grow only 5% of world production. Growers plant different kinds of sunflowers for oil production or seed production. Sunflower oil is the 3rd most common vegetable oil and is preferred for its light color and high smoke points.

My prior attempts to grow the seeds usually yielded many weeds and lots of frustration. However, this year when I was spraying my burndown and pre-emergent weed killers on my soybeans fields I discovered that several of the same products that were being used in the soybean fields were labeled for sunflower use. Applying those products eliminated the weeds in my sunflower patches.

Another problem was the rabbits. They always ate ½ the young plants so this year I planted all the patches 3 times and created a thick mat of young plants that even the heartiest eater could not destroy. This year I planted four patches, almost ½ an acre total, and they look great. Today’s lesson for those in school is; being a proficient reader has paid off huge dividends many times over in my lifetime.

Is it possible for there to be a much larger field of sunflowers in my future? Time will tell. I have already had one friend ask me how I planted them so he could try to duplicate a similar patch at his house next year. My patch of sunflowers is indeed outstanding in the field. I wonder if I could still say that if the derecho had struck Will County.

Now that this article is about done I need to research another tidbit. I sold 10 dozen ears of sweet corn to a neighbor. She told me a unique way to store it for use later in the year. She takes the whole ear, leaving the husk on, and freezes it in a paper lawn and leaf bag. She said it keeps well and tastes great when she takes a few ears out each time for a meal and heats them in the microwave. No cooking, blanching, or cutting your fingers to the bone trying to take the kernels off the cob for storage.

I had no idea this was possible. I will now search the internet to verify this unique and simple process. I am becoming proficient at E-learning, and I am not even school age. Maybe I should also test it in my own freezer.