

THE CULTIVATION OF HOPS

Anyone who likes to drink pale ale likes the taste of hops, a crop that used to be grown in New York State, right here in Perinton. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries New York produced about eighty percent of the nation's hops. The hop plant is an attractive climbing vine that can grow up to 25 feet in height. The cone-shaped flowers are an essential ingredient in beer brewing. The bitter taste of the hops balances the sweetness of the malt in the brewing process. Hops also have an antibiotic and preservative effect, stopping spoilage from the wild bacteria often found in beer, a useful quality in the days before widespread refrigeration.

Hops have a long history, from the Babylonians who used them to brew some of mankind's first beers, to the Romans who brought hops to Britain to use as a vegetable. The first reference to hops in continental Europe appeared in 736 AD and perhaps the first mention of hops being added to beer appeared in 1079. It took six more centuries, however, before hops were widely accepted in the brewing of beer, eventually replacing gruit. Gruit, a combination of herbs, often including rosemary and yarrow among others, was used for brewing beer, and each brewer had his own secret combination. Those brewers were understandably quite antagonistic about the hop. Nevertheless, hops gradually made inroads. In the 1300's, the Dutch began importing hopped beer and then began brewing their own. Hops were planted in England by the early 1400's and in 1436, Henry VI praised hopped beer as "notable, healthy, and temperate."

At first the American colonists imported English hops, but in 1629, the Massachusetts Bay Colony ordered seeds to be shipped from England, and by 1640 colonists were harvesting their own hops. Apparently they had many other uses for the plant as well. Sanborn Brown in his book *Wines and Beers of Old New England* states: "The hop cones used in the beer brewing were not the only part of the plant that the farmers found useful. It was a common vine in the settler's kitchen garden. The young shoots in the spring were eaten as a special treat in salads... a wax extracted from the tendrils was used as a reddish-brown vegetable dye, the fibers were used in textiles as a substitute for flax, the stalks were used for basket and wicker-work, and the leaves and spent hops were an excellent food for sheep." New England farmers harvested the first commercial hop crop in 1791.

The hop arrived in Madison County, New York, in 1808. James Coolidge's "strange new crop" sold for \$1,000 a ton in 1817. Due to crop failures in England and the opening of the Midwest after the building of the Erie Canal, the demand for New York hops exploded, leading to the harvesting of over three million tons annually by 1855. Grown in over 43 counties, including Monroe, hop yields by the latter part of the century peaked at over 60 million tons per year with Otsego County being the prime producer. A map of early Perinton by Marjorie Snow Merriman notes that in 1840 Christopher Winne raised hops and employed about 200 pickers on his Turk Hill Road farm. His name also appears on two maps from the 1850's. Charles Titus and E. Copeland also are said to have raised hops, and area farmers often grew a few hop vines on their fences for their own use.

In the 19th century, hop flowers were harvested in the fall, usually by women and children, as their smaller hands were more adept at clearing the vines and handling the tender cones. The lupulin glands at the base of the flower cones contain the oils and acids that give the hops its distinctive bitter flavor. After harvesting, the cones were dried in "hop houses," often built in a pyramid shape.

Despite its eventual widespread usage and popularity, the hop plant is not easy to grow. Besides requiring 30 foot poles for the vines, it seems to be susceptible to mildew as well as infestations of plant lice, aphids, and grubs. In 1909, the downey mildew, sometimes referred to as the "blue mold," ruined New York's hop production. Several years later, in 1914, the crop was decimated by aphids. Finally, Prohibition finished off New York's hop industry and production moved to California and Washington State where it flourishes today. A small news article from the era speaks to farmers: "Will any of our Perinton farmers plant hops for the brewer's use this fall? Have a little talk with conscience about it first, friends."

In recent years, the interest in craft brewing has increased as has the possibility of renewed hop cultivation in New York. According to an article in the September 15, 2009, *Syracuse Post-Standard*, there are at least three upstate hops growers selling their products commercially. Several subsequent news articles from the upstate region attest to a small but significant increase in hops growing in central New York counties. Whether growers in Perinton or Monroe County begin once again to raise hops remains to be seen.



Picking hops in Perinton