

Growing Hops for Craft Beers in the Ag Reserve

By Clara Jackson

There are a wide variety of crops grown and livestock raised in the Montgomery County (“MoCo”) Agricultural Reserve. Some of the most prominent crops grown include corn, soybeans, wheat and barley. If I had an opportunity to manage a farm in the Ag Reserve, I would try a different crop. While many would choose to grow the established crops, I believe that it would be beneficial to diversify the Ag Reserve by introducing a new crop--hops. This would offer my new farm a niche so that my farm wouldn't have to compete with older, more established farms. It would also help expand the economy of the Agricultural Reserve, because new crops attract new businesses and people. If I was given a farm in the Montgomery County Agricultural Reserve, I would grow organic hops (specifically Cascade, Golding, Nugget, Chinook, and Fuggle hops) to sell to the various craft breweries in the DC-Maryland-Virginia area.

The Craft Beer Industry has grown substantially in the past eight years. Growing over 13% in 2015 alone, the craft brewery business now represents 12% of the total beer market and continues to grow. As the demand for craft beer increases, the demand for small farms that specialize in hops (particularly Cascade, Golding, Nugget, Chinook, and Fuggle, which are very flavorful and used predominantly in craft beer) also increases. The MoCo Ag Reserve is ideally situated to serve not only craft breweries in Maryland, but also Virginia and the District of Columbia. It would be easy to find buyers for my hops because brewers would have convenient access to their supplier, saving on shipping and transport. Brewers would also be able to visit my farm and advertise their use of locally-sourced organic hops, which is very appealing to customers of craft breweries. Brewers could also suggest hop varieties for planting, based on plans for particular IPAs, stouts, or ales. Other ingredients used in craft beer are among the most commonly grown in the Ag Reserve, so my customers (brewers) may want to get the rest of their ingredients from the same area. This would increase business in the Ag Reserve for

many farmers and increase awareness of the Ag Reserve in general, as breweries advertise the local source of their ingredients.

I would farm my hops organically (without the use of pesticides and chemicals). Chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides can be extremely harmful to the environment, if not managed well, particularly for our waterways. As pesticides are sprayed on fields, they often spread to surrounding land, contaminating the soil and killing non-target plants. This reduces the diversity in the environment as plants species are killed off, and the few that survive proliferate and absorb the pesticide. This in turn can cause adverse effects on local wildlife as they consume the pesticide through the plant. Another example of the effects of pesticides is the diminishing bee population. Pesticides (containing neonicotinoids) kill bees as well as cause Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). This negatively affects the Ag Reserve economy as the bees are key pollinators and without them, crop production (particularly for fruit) decreases dramatically. Pesticides also make their way into waterways after rain storms, contaminating the water, with effects on aquatic ecosystems similar to the effects on ground level ecosystems. Furthermore, pesticides often remain absorbed in the ground for a long time, depending on the type of pesticide used and the overall health of the surrounding land. In order to preserve the Ag Reserve for future generations and to maintain a viable economy, I would grow my hops organically and encourage my fellow farmers to do the same if possible.

Because of the popularity and growth of the craft beer industry and craft breweries in the DC-Maryland-Virginia area, I believe that there is a demand for locally sourced organic hops. Therefore, if I were given a farm in the Montgomery County Agricultural Reserve, I would grow organic hops for craft breweries. Consumers (breweries) would be attracted to the convenience and quality of my hops, and these consumers could increase business for my fellow farmers in the Ag Reserve. By farming organic hops, I would help expand the economy of the Ag Reserve and simultaneously help and preserve it for future generations.

Reference

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