

How to Grow Hops

(humulus lupulus)

Homegrown hops are a fun way to provide yourself with great, organic brewing ingredients. They usually take two to three years before you get a really good crop, and mostly they are best to use in and American IPA, Pale Ale, or even a nice hoppy Brown Ale.

First and foremost, you need a plant. Hops are grown from rhizomes that can generally be found at your local homebrew shop and many on-line homebrew shops around April. From there, it is very simple. Plant the rhizome completely underground in well drained soil. If you live somewhere where your soil is more clay than anything, plant the rhizome in a mound without a dirt ring that keeps water in. It's an easy way to cheat without planting in a store-bought soil.

The reason you don't want to plant in the ground with a store-bought soil is that the roots will never want to leave the good stuff and grow into your crappy backyard dirt, and that will make a kind of natural pot , leading to whorl-root and other problems. When your hops start to grow, you will want them acclimatized to your native soil so they can spread like crazy. So get your Kellogg Amend and mix one part good stuff to two parts native. That will give you a good start, but not confine the roots.

Once your hops start to grow, give them something to climb up on. Many homebrew gardeners and even brew pubs will just use fishing line or string, that way when the roots die back to the ground after harvest, the cold-season/off-season maintenance is quick and easy. Just cut off your string a few inches off the ground after the first freeze, and you're done until next season.

Hops grow clockwise up whatever they have as a trellis, so don't try to wind them counter-clockwise because they will unravel themselves. Also, whatever you decide to use for a growing structure, try to stick to semi-organic materials, i.e. wood, hemp string, etc. Many homegrown hop growers have found that using your rod-iron fence or other metal material tends to absorb too much of the sun's heat and burn off that tender new growth.

Some experts say that you should wait until the plant has a chance to drop all the excess nutrients from the vines back to the roots. When a plant prepares to go dormant for the off-season, they generally store their nutrients for the following year as they go to sleep. You don't have to get crazy and wait until December or January on a certain day or anything, just chop the top after the first freeze. If it doesn't freeze where you live, let them die completely back, wait about two weeks, and chop!

Hops have a capability of growing to twenty feet in a season, and a nice mature plant will shoot off a good six inches or so of new growth per day.

The Fresh Brew

Plan to use your fresh hops when they are all mostly ready to be picked. I like to have my grains and/or extract ready for a weekend brew ahead of time, and keep an eye on them to see when most or all are nice and big and green with yellow tips, and then just say, "Well, looks like I'm brewing this weekend!"

Fresh hops seem to work very well added as late addition aroma hops. I will get some pellets and use those for my early addition bittering, then do handfuls of fresh hops, about an ounce or two at a time dependent upon the recipe, from thirty minutes left of the boil down to zero. Homegrown hops tend to have a grassy flavor, so account for that in your recipe, or just be ready for it!

I just use however much I have harvested. Some brewers like to use their weight scale for repeatability next season, and that's a great way to do it, too! I tend to change my recipe yearly, so I don't worry about it! Whatever wets your mash paddle, right?

If there are any brewers or hop-growers out there who have more specific questions on how to grow or maintain their hops or their soil, just shoot me an email and I'll be more than happy to help!

Also, check out our Hops Pests and Disease How-To at BrewChatter.com!

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