

Growing Hops

By Mike LeBlanc

Hops are easy to grow, a very hardy plant (basically a weed - they grow wild in Manitoba) & they are perennial

They grow UP, so they need something to climb on, like a trellis. I have had good luck with jute string strung up and along the top of a fence, or up to the eaves of a house or garage

You can purchase hop seeds off eBay, but only female plants produce cones & lupulin, so we purchase and trade rhizomes, which are the roots of female plants (describe what they look like)

In Manitoba, Hop rhizomes are usually planted in late April or early May

Hops prefer soft, well drained soil, plenty of sunlight (ideally a southern exposure) and a moderate amount of water. Don't let them dry out completely, but don't be drowning them on a daily basis either

Dig a trench, 8 inches wide, 8 inches deep and about 2 feet long. Fill with good quality soil. I've had good luck with triple mix (equal parts topsoil, peat moss and compost). Place the hops in the trench lengthways, about 4-6 inches down. If growing more than 1 variety, plant them at least 8 feet apart.

In a couple of weeks, you'll see hop shoots poking up. After you have 4-6 shoots that are about 12 inches long, choose the two healthiest and strongest ones and cut back the others. Take these two bines and train the hop bines around the trellis or string

Once the bines are 8-10 feet high, cut the leaves and shoots off the bottom 3 feet or so of the plants.

The bines will grow quite quickly, especially through May and June. By early to mid-July, the growing will slow down and eventually stop. By late July or early August you will see tiny hop cones appearing. They will grow bigger throughout August and be ready to harvest in early September. A mature cone will smell aromatic, feel dry and papery, springy and will leave traces of lupulin on your fingers. Pick one and rip it apart. The lupulin powder should be thick and yellow-gold in colour.

For harvesting, it's easiest to cut down the whole hop plant. Pick off the cones and discard the rest. The bines have lots of little hairs on them so you may want to wear gloves. Dry the cones as quickly as possible. Out of direct sunlight, in an airy place, let the hop cones dry. I do it on a window screen, all spread out. They dry in a couple of days. After they are dry, bag them, squeeze out air and freeze them.

For the hop plants themselves, cut back to ground level after harvesting, cover with some mulch or compost and leave them for the winter.