



# **HUMULUS LUPULUS**

## **AND OTHER BITTER TRUTHS**

### **Covid-19: Risks and side effects in hop farming**

This is how you train hop vines: kneel or squat down beside a hop hill; wrap three shoots clockwise around each of the two strings attached to the trellis wire above; pull out the remaining shoots. Done. Then move on to the next plant. Sounds easy, but it's back-breaking work. A farm hand manages about 20 to 30 plants per hour, or 200 to 300 in a day.

**“Regular work-outs at the gym are no use for this”, says Florian Weingart**, a buyer with hop service provider BarthHaas. “These are movements that our bodies aren't used to. Some people don't even last three days.” All the more reason to thank the 5,000 or so volunteers from Germany who bravely subjected themselves to this unfamiliar farm work during the lockdown in April and May and in so doing were a huge support to the hop growers. Weingart, who works very closely with the growers, supporting and advising them throughout the hop year, also lent a hand this season.


People from all walks of life responded to the appeals for volunteers that the farm machinery syndicates and BarthHaas posted on the Internet. Together with his colleagues Annika Riedl and Vanessa Auzinger, Weingart was able to place hundreds of men and women with growers. Some of them were self-employed, others were from the catering trade, furloughed workers from the automotive industry, students or employees of breweries such as Brauhaus Riegele from Augsburg, Hofbräuhaus Traunstein and Brauerei Leibinger from Swabia. The Radeberger Group sent employees and apprentices from all over Germany: Jever, Bremen, Berlin, Kempten, Frankfurt, Freiberg, Cologne, Dortmund, Rostock and Dresden. Students from Weihenstephan University of Applied Sciences were even able to earn credit points towards their Bachelor's degrees for the work.

**Roughly 10,000 farm hands are needed for hop training in the Hallertau and Tettang regions each year.**

That's about five times as many as for the hop harvest which, thanks to bine-cutting and picking machines, is less labour-intensive. Hop training, however, is manual work. It cannot be automated. Selecting the six shoots to be trained out of the 30 to 50 that each plant produces is itself a task that requires an expert eye and instantaneous selection skill. No machine is capable of that. Human error does creep in at times, however – when it comes to training the shoots in a clockwise direction! Florian Weingart laughs: “It's all a question of practice.” This work is indispensable for crop yield: if it is not trained, the bine will not find the string and will not climb, grow and flourish. If the bine is not trained, there will be no cones to provide the lupulin to give the beer its aroma and bitterness.

**In the end, three to four thousand hands did still arrive from Poland, and they were joined by another thousand from Romania.**

Many of the seasonal workers come regularly and are well-trained skilled workers who can keep going till the end. The same could not be said for the German volunteers, of course. Some of them had to face the fact that the work was too hard; others hadn't planned to work for three weeks in the first place – understandably. As a result, this year constant changes of crew were part of everyday life on the farms. This meant that the growers were continually having to train newcomers for the work. In cases where there was still a shortage of hands, some growers introduced a faster new system combining manual bine training and biochemical removal of the remaining shoots using a rapeseed oil acid. It remains to be seen whether that practice will continue or not.





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**“Training the vines was an expensive business in 2020”,** says Florian Weingart summing up. “Although everyone worked harder than they’d ever done before, it all went 20 to 25 per cent more slowly than usual.” No offence meant – in fact, quite the opposite: “It was an extremely positive experience for everyone involved”, says Weingart. The hop growers were overwhelmed by the spontaneous support they received, without which they would never have managed. The volunteers, for some of whom it was their first ever experience of farm work in general and hop farming in particular, voiced their respect for the hop growers and the seasonal workers. They found themselves seeing subjects like plant protection, for example, in a new light. “No campaign can create the fellowship and mutual appreciation that resulted from this experience”, says Weingart.

**Now the hop-farming community can look ahead calmly to the 2020 harvest. Some of the volunteers have already put their names down for that, too. The mood of optimism has also been encouraged by the plant development and infection status (as at the time of going to press).**