Summertime Brewing

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It is generally stated that optimal fermentation temperatures for ales is somewhere in the mid 60's to low 70's Fahrenheit. For lagers, the appropriate temperature range is in the mid 40's to low 50's. The disadvantage of fermenting above these suggested temperature ranges is that the yeast will create off-flavors. So, how do we brew anything in Tallahassee? Well, lagers are difficult at any time of year. Ales are feasible during those few cool months of the year, but it seems that brewing in the summertime is difficult. Here are some tips for brewing during the long hot Tallahassee summer. (Some of the tips that follow came from "Cool Tips for Summer Brewing" in Brew Your Own, August 1995.

No-Tech Tips

Tip 1. Brew anyway and accept the fact that your homebrew just won't quite taste as good as those brewed during the cooler months. Console yourself with the realization that it's still better than most affordable commercial beers.

Tip 2. Choose styles whose flavor profiles will be least affected by the warmer temperatures. Many English ale styles, such as Pale Ales, Porters, and Stouts are reasonable choices as their flavor profiles may include esters and/or diacetyl, each of which is increased by higher temperature fermentation. Or, for even more intense fun, brew a Belgian Trappist Ale or German wheat beer. Esters are a definite part of these styles. An added piece of advice is to use a liquid yeast strain which will perform well at these temperatures. The list of liquid yeasts and their appropriate temperature ranges is too long for this space, but a general rule is too choose one of the British or Belgian strains. (Wyeast 1056, the ever-popular American Ale strain is OK, also.)

Low-Tech Tips

Tip 3. Wrap your fermenter in a wet towel and place it in a tray of water. The towel will "wick" or pull the water up out of the tray. As the moisture in the towel evaporates, it will absorb heat, thereby cooling your fermenter and its contents. This works best in dry climates. (Note that Tallahassee is NOT a dry climate.) You can improve the cooling action by aiming a small fan at the towel for at least part of the day. This trick will probably work better on a glass carboy than on a plastic bucket.

Tip 4. Place your carboy by one of your air-conditioners or by an AC duct. Building a small enclosure to trap the cooler air may help.

Medium-Tech Tips

Tip 5. Build an insulated trash can to hold an ice-water bath in which you place your fermenter. The following detailed instructions were included in the May 1995 newsletter and were written by our good friend John Hartline. I am reprinting them with liberal editing (but, then again, aren't all editors liberal) and without any permission from him, so please don't tell. (Shhhh!) I have used this arrangement and it works.

I purchased a 30 gallon vinyl trash can, two hot water heater insulating blankets and an indoor outdoor thermometer. The total came to about $35.00. I wanted to use two insulating blankets because I wanted to be able to control the temperature in the can with fewer fluctuations. So I got everything home, and wrapped the can with both insulating blankets. I knew the "cooler" would sweat, so I used duct tape wrapped around the insulation in addition to the tape included with the blankets. I also cut and installed a piece of the material on the bottom to keep moisture off of the carpet. Everything looked great and I was optimistic about it working, so I moved on.

At last, I've got a batch of beer in the fermenter and I'm ready to give my new lager-cooler a try. I filled the trash can with about 20 gallons of water, hung the thermometer on the side and slipped the outdoor temperature probe into the water. I used an empty 3 gallon bird food container inside the cooler to set the carboy on and added three of my two liter bottles of frozen water to the water around the carboy. I used a vinyl hose from the airlock into a quart jar with about 2 inches of water in it as a combination blow off tube and airlock. I wet a towel and draped it over the top of the cooler. Next morning, the temperature in the cooler was holding at about 60 degrees. I replaced the bottles with three more frozen ones, and within 36 hours, the temperature in the cooler was holding at about 45 degrees.

Once I reached the desired temperature I found it was easy to hold it there with two frozen bottles at twelve hour intervals. Since you need to let the bottles freeze for 24 hours to be effective, this means I need six bottles. If your goal is to maintain fermenter temperature at approximately 65 degrees, then you will only need to rotate one frozen bottle every twelve hours.

High-Tech Options

Tip 6. Build an air-conditioned chicken coop for your fermenters.

Tip 7. Buy an extra refrigerator. Buy an external thermostat to override the fridge's normal operating range.