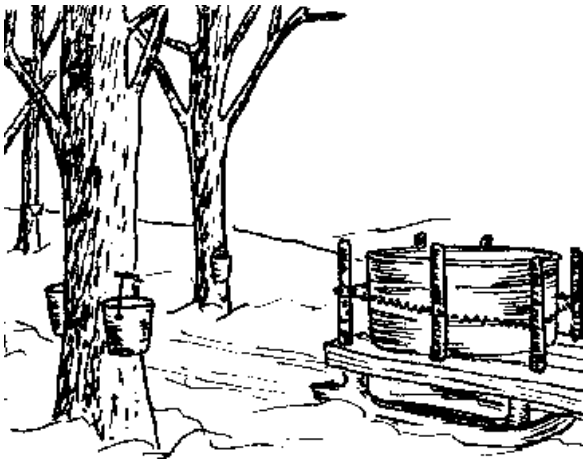
Backyard Maple Syruping

Article originally published in
The St. Croix Current · Volume 14, Number 1 · January/February/March · 1995
Graphics and content modified in 2015

The temperatures may be cold and the snow deep, but it's not too early to be thinking about that sweet golden treasure of spring – maple syrup. Making your own syrup can be an exciting, almost magical experience. Best of all, it's not that difficult. With a little research and patience you could have jars of syrup on your shelves for a fraction of the price you would expect to pay at the store. To avoid frustration, start planning now. There's nothing quite as aggravating as having lots of sap flowing and no more buckets to catch it, or a pot of wonderfully sweet syrup and no jars to put it in! A little thought before the season starts may save you big headaches later.



The syrup season and "mud season" coincide. Sap is flowing best in the maples when nights are below freezing and days are around 40°F. When the flower buds begin to open on the branches, the sap turns starchy and bitter and the taps will need to be removed.

Syrup can be made from any tree in the maple family. Do some scouting around your property or obtain permission to search someone else's land for maples. All Maples, including Boxelders, will make a fine syrup. The difference lies in the sugar content of the sap. Sugar Maples have a much higher concentration of sugar in the sap, while box elders have the lowest sugar content. It takes roughly 86 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup from Boxelder sap!

Choose trees that are healthy and at least 10 inches in diameter‡. If a tree is out in the open where it will get more sunlight, it will tend to warm up faster and produce sap earlier than those in the more shaded woods. Some folks mark their trees before the season starts, others just hunt them down with tapping supplies in hand.

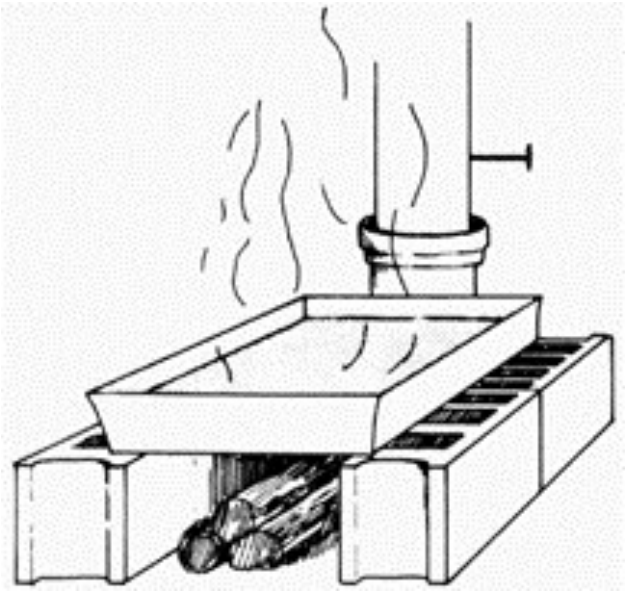
So, you found a tree and the time is right. Now what? It's time to tap the tree. You'll need a hand drill and a 7/16" bit to drill the hole. Choose a spot directly over a big root if possible since that's where a lot of the sap comes from. Drill the hole at a slight upward angle and 3" into the tree. That puts it into the xylem or sapwood part of the tree – the "up elevators" carrying the stored sugary sap up to the buds. On days when the sap is running, you'll see it comes out almost before you can get the tap in.

Spouts or spiles can be purchased from maple syrup suppliers or occasionally found in hardware stores. One spile is needed for every hole you drill. If you have a large maple tree you can tap it more than once. Put in one spile for the first 10" in diameter, then one additional spile for each additional 5" of diameter. For example, if your tree is 25" across, you could put in four spiles‡. Gently tap the spiles into the hole in the tree making sure the hole in the spile is at the bottom (to catch the sap which is moving up the tree). Most spiles are made out of aluminum which is soft metal. Using a small block of wood between the spile and the hammer will keep them from becoming badly dented.

‡ In order to ensure the long-term health of syruping trees, guidelines for the permissible number of taps per tree has been modified since 1995. According to the most recent guidelines, only trees with a diameter of 12 inches or greater should be tapped, and one more tap can be made for an additional 6 inches of diameter. There should be no more than two taps per tree, regardless of the diameter.

Catch the sap in a bucket or a one gallon plastic milk jug. Milk jugs are plentiful and cheap. Simply leave the lid on and cut a small hole in the side of the bottle, up near the top. Slide the spile through the hole and you have a great sap catcher. Buckets work fine too, but you may need to rig up some sort of cover for them since insects will be attracted to the sap as the weather warms up. As the buckets become full, collect the sap and store it until it is ready to be evaporated. Clean plastic garbage cans work great as storage vessels.

Now the fun part – evaporating off the water from the sap! You'll need some sort of pan to hold the sap and a heat source. Whatever you do, DON'T evaporate in your house! More than one well-intentioned backyard syruper has looked in dismay at wall paper that has peeled from the wall! There are lots of ideas out there about making evaporators. Folks have modified outdoor fireplaces, used Coleman stoves, and invented many ingenious ways to make syrup. Try your local library for books on making maple syrup. There are some great ones out there. At any rate, you need the water in the sap to evaporate and leave the sugar behind. Keep evaporating and adding sap until you get a large batch that has turned darker color and is beginning to taste quite sweet.



The boiling temperature all along will be 212° F (use a candy thermometer). By definition, syrup stage is reached at 219° F or when the syrup "skirts" off the spoon instead of dripping. When your syrup is close to the final stage, remove it from your fire or outdoor stove and bring it inside where you can control the heat better. Keep a close eye on it though because things happen very quickly. Boil-overs are messy and difficult to clean up.

When you reach 219° F, remove the syrup from the stove and strain it through a filter. Wool filters work very well (they're available from syrup suppliers). Remember to wet the filter first with hot water and rinse it often for best results. Ladle the hot, finished product into hot, clean canning jars, cap, and put the ring in place. As the syrup cools, the jars will seal themselves. Syrup will keep well for several years in a cool dark place or refrigerator.

Backyard syruping is something that can be done on a very small scale if you choose, so don't let the process intimidate you. Being outside in the early spring is enchanting. Take time to appreciate the cardinal's clear spring mating whistle or enjoy the crackle from the fire and steam rising from the evaporator pan. Whether it's something you do as a family or on your own, you'll find muddy boots and a smoky jacket are worth it!

Maple Syrup Supply Sources

Anderson's Maple Syrup, Inc.
2391 40th St.
Cumberland, WI 54829
Andersonmaplesyrup.com

C & C Sugar bush
305 Vinewood Lane N.
Plymouth, MN 55441

Tap My Trees, LLC
Tapmytrees.com
888-990-9948

Roth Sugar Bush
656 Tower Drive
Cadott, WI 54727
715-289-(3829 or 3665)
Rothsugarbush.com

Reynolds Sugar Bush
Aniwa, WI 55409
715-449-2057

Waterloo USA, Inc.
HCR 63, Box 35A
Baton, VT 05822
802-525-3588

GPM, LLC
33186 Co Hwy W
Holcombe, WI 54745-4430
715-447-8440
Gbmllc.com