

“The Sweetness of Spring”

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As we brace for a few more weeks of cooler than normal temperature, I am thankful as it gives me a little extra time to get ready for my favorite spring ritual – maple syruping. This “spring into spring” pastime can be enjoyed by all ages and is a great way (and great excuse) to get outside during the early spring. All it takes to get started is a maple tree, a few pieces of equipment and a little weather luck.

Obviously the most important item for this activity is one or more maple trees. Maples are easiest to identify in the fall with their distinctive leaf shape (think Canadian flag) and color. If you remember to flag them in the fall, they will be easy to pick out in the spring. Of course at this time of year, that won't help you much. Maples, however, are still fairly simple to ID in the winter. They are one of only a few species in Minnesota that have opposite branching (ash and dogwood are the others). Next you want to take a close look at the buds – Sugar maples (the best for syruping) have small, pointy, brown buds. Red maples have fatter reddish buds. While Red maples are more common locally, they have a much lower sugar content and make a lower quality syrup.



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the tree has been tapped previously, make sure the new holes are at least 4-5” away from any old holes and avoid placing holes directly above or below old taps.



Once you have your sugar bush identified, the next step is to get your equipment ready. The basic gear is a container with a lid to collect the syrup and a tap or spile. Your container can be as simple as a milk jug (rinse well) or lidded bucket. The spile is the tube placed in the tree to harvest the sap. It is best to get an actual spile that is intended for syruping instead of making one yourself. They are relatively inexpensive and can be found easily online. Traditional commercial spiles will require you to drill a tap hole with a 7/16” bit. Tap holes should be placed in sound wood, any rotten parts or blemished bark should be avoided. If

How many taps you will need depends on the tree size (a 10 inch diameter is minimum for one tap, 20” for two taps, maximum three taps per tree), and how much work you want to do. The average tree will yield approximately 5 to 15 gallons of sap per tap. It takes 10 gallons of sap to make one quart of finished syrup. When to tap depends on the weather. Sap flow is best when the days are around 40° F (really good on sunny days) and the nights drop below freezing. Once the

buds pop on the trees, the sap run is over as chemical changes in the sap ruin the flavor.

Now that you have dozens of gallons of sap (If you aren't cooking the sap as you harvest it, it needs to be stored in a cool place out of the sun), how do you turn it into that wonderful coater of



pancakes and waffles? The “cook off” can be an all day event depending on the amount of sap you have. Since maple sap is at best only 3-4% sugar and 90+% water, it is best to do your cooking outside (unless you have some kitchen wall paper you want removed). I use a large 15 gallon stock pot out over my fire pit, but any large pot or roasting pan will work. You will also need a thermometer that goes past 220^oF. The sap needs to be boiled until it reaches 219^o F. I usually pull it off the fire at 212-215^oF and bring it inside to finish it. If you will be using the syrup in the next few months, you can bottle and refrigerate. If you plan on storing some, it needs to be bottled in sterilized jars with the syrup heated to 180-185^oF. Either way, the finished syrup should be filtered as it is bottled to remove solids. Any food grade cloth filter will work, but don't use paper coffee filters as the holes are too small for the syrup to get through.

Syrup season may be short, but so is spring in Minnesota. Gathering and creating food from the land helps reconnect us to the natural world.

Besides, those pancakes will taste that much better with locally made syrup. So, whether you are making the syrup yourself or you head to a local sugar bush to sample their syrups, spring is definitely the time to “sap” to it.