

Turn your tap and let the maple syrup flow

BY LAIRD FUNK

Hey sap suckers—it's time to get ready for sugaring season! Ninety days from now you could be busy making your own maple syrup from our native bigleaf maples.

Yes, you really could be! As I explained a couple issues ago, our native bigleaf maples produce a sweet sap that you can make into real maple syrup just by boiling off water till the 2% sugar sap is turned into 66-1/2% sugar maple syrup. Delicious, sweet maple syrup from your own trees!

All it takes (aside from bigleaf maple trees) are a few taps called spiles, a portable drill of some sort, a few feet of plastic tubing and containers to collect the sap in as it flows from the tree. The process is simple. You drill a 7/16" hole, angled slightly upward, 2½ inches deep in a tree over 6" in diameter and tap in the spile. The plastic tubing is connected to it and routed into a collection container of some sort. Plastic milk jugs work well; just drill a hole in the lid and slide the tubing through it.

The containers are checked and emptied every day or so, and the sap is transferred to an evaporating pan for boiling into syrup. I used a turkey roasting pan, which provided a large surface area, and a gas range for the heat source. As you boil off the water, the color changes to amber and you can smell maple almost immediately. Care should be used not to boil the pan dry, adding more sap as the level decreases. The sugar

content of the syrup can be checked either with a hydrometer, which measures specific gravity, or with a refractometer.

Hydrometers used in brewing and winemaking will suffice to measure sap sugar levels, but a special one for syrup is needed to finish the process. These are inexpensive and can be found in maple syrup supply catalogs. I can help you

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find one. A refractometer suitable for syrup-making costs around \$60 online and makes the job foolproof and easy.

As the sugar content approaches 60%, a mineral precipitate called sugar sand or niter forms and settles out. It can be mostly filtered out using milk filters from the Grange and then finished by letting the finished syrup sit long enough for the niter to settle out and decanting off the liquid.

I noted last time that there is an entire bigleaf maple syrup industry developing on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, which provides useful added income for woodlot owners there. A leader in that work is Gary Backlund of Ladysmith, British Columbia. The author (with his daughter Katherine) of a recommended book, *Bigleaf Sugaring, Tapping the Western Maple*, Gary runs a 70-acre managed forest producing lumber, firewood and maple syrup. He can be contacted at BLmaple@telus.net to order the book, which cost me less than \$20. It covers the subject well and in a friendly tone. Tell him I sent you.

A friendly and helpful person, Gary welcomed Lynn and me to his home last June during a journey north. He generously spent hours with us showing us what he does and how he does it, and touring his forest with us. His climate produces many, many more maples than here and they flow stronger than here due to the moisture there, but ours work just fine and flow enough to make it worthwhile. His volume may be more than we could match, producing over 2,100 liters of syrup a year. "After that, we lose count," he explained. He strongly encourages anyone with bigleaf trees to tap them.

He also turned me on to his equipment supplier, allowing me to obtain a stock of spiles, tubing and fittings, which I brought back to supply those of you who want to try this rewarding process. I am selling these items at my cost till they are gone. They are also available from syrup supply houses in the US, for which I can give contact information. My prices are: 50 cents per spile; tubing (food grade), 25 cents per foot; and Ts (for joining one or more spiles to feed a single container), 40 cents.

Of course, the weather plays a role. While bigleafs can flow anytime between October and March, the temperature governs the flow. On the west coast, maples need nights with temperatures at freezing or below at branch level and afternoons warming above 50 degrees or so to flow. Here those temperatures normally occur in January and February.

So till then, start collecting your milk jugs (rinse them out immediately after emptying, and wash them with a little dishwasher detergent, rinsing well before using them for sap). Give me



Top photo: Sap flowing from a bigleaf maple tree to collection bucket through a spile tapped into the trunk.

Bottom photo: Sap simmering on stovetop.

Photo at left: Finished product to enjoy over pancakes, waffles, French toast, ice cream—or in your coffee.

a call to obtain tapping supplies or for what advice I can give you. I'll be glad to share what I know. If I have any left, I can even share a taste of last year's product. Then, you can make your own.

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