

Award-winning maple syrup prompts forest cleanup

BY LAIRD FUNK

One of my favorite winter recreational pursuits, as some of you may know, is tapping our local bigleaf maples to make maple syrup. There are very few activities that entice you outside in the coldest times of the year, but tapping creates a mind-set that allows you to ignore the chill as you gather gallons of sap and boil them down to that wonderful liquid, maple syrup.

My third year tapping was different from the previous ones. The maple trees as well as humans noticed our critical lack of rainfall and responded differently than with a normal rain year. All over the maple tapping areas, sap yield was much diminished—if sap flowed at all. Those trees in my woods that did flow started out with a good flow and high sugar content, but both dropped over the next four days or so; then the flow ceased instead of flowing for a couple of weeks. Each successive tree was the same. Although I got some flow, I ended up with only two and a half *quarts* of syrup compared to two and a half *gallons* last season.

Up on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, sponsors of the annual February Bigleaf Maple Syrup Festival had to beg for enough sap to run the evaporator demonstration and make tea for sale. Speaking of the festival, each year they hold a syrup judging contest with blind samples entered in three groups: light, medium

and dark. This year the competition went “international” for the first time because of my entry in the dark category. My syrup was actually supposed to be entered last year, but the wonder of Canadian Customs delayed the package for three weeks and it arrived long after the judging. My mentor volunteered to store my syrup and enter it for me in this year’s contest.

Imagine my surprise when the festival organizers called one evening to tell me I had won second place (see ribbon picture)! Surprise was experienced at the festival too, with the caller telling me that when my name and address were announced, a hush fell over the room. Finally one person asked out loud, “You mean he drove all the way here just to compete?”

This year when looking for trees to tap, I ventured into a section of my woods I had never tapped before. What I found were some nice maples and other trees totally crowded by many four- to five-inch diameter trees that had sprung up over the years, grew well and then ran out of light due to over-topping by bigger trees, and now were in decline. The crowded conditions made even walking difficult and also presented a significant fire danger with no way of stopping a fire if it occurred. Something had to be done.

Additionally I had decided to convert

my evaporator from propane to wood fuel and needed several cords of various sized firewood that could be obtained by proper thinning.

Luke Ruediger, a well-known local forester, agreed to meet with me to figure out how to proceed with the task. We walked the area, noting which trees were healthy and which were sick, injured or simply in the way, while also trying to increase afternoon sun on the maples so that they had a better chance of flowing with the right winter temperatures. The “before” picture shows typical conditions that we encountered before we set to work.

With Luke doing the saw work and I and a helper acting as the cleanup crew sorting and moving the brush and firewood, we set to work. Things went very smoothly and we made great progress. Because we kept anything over one and a half inches (just the right size for fueling an evaporator), the normally expected amount of brush was greatly reduced, making cleanup much



Laird Funk won second place as an “international” competitor in the Bigleaf Maple Syrup Festival held annually on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada.

easier. Soon sections that were totally overgrown changed into well-lit, spacious woodland vistas. The “after” picture shows the difference.

The stumps seen in the “after” picture will be later re-cut and painted with glyphosate herbicide. The trees cut were ashes and maples, which are notorious stump-sprouters and would quickly regrow and create another overgrown mess without the glyphosate treatment.

Now, the overgrown tangle has been transformed into a welcoming riparian forest with a wide range of life, including gray squirrels and wood ducks and resting places for wildlife. The clearing also provided access to treasures not seen before, like a 12-inch tall morel, drifts of bleeding hearts and fritillaries and the hundreds of trilliums that grace the site.

I look forward to next winter’s tapping season to see if our work helped our maples to produce more sap. I’ll let you know how it comes out.

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Before forest cleanup: The author called in Luke Ruediger to help reduce the crowded conditions and significant fire danger.



After forest cleanup: Some sections of Laird’s forest are now well-lit and spacious woodlands, fostering healthy maple trees.

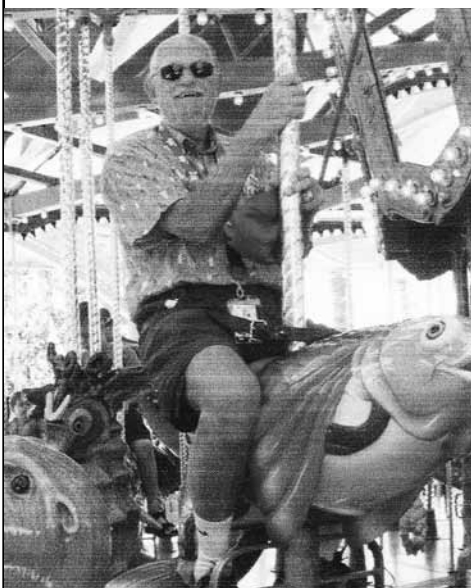


Gater volunteers retire

Our endless thanks go out to two long-time *Applegater* volunteers:

- **Pat Kellogg**, one of our eagle-eyed proofreaders who cleaned up our act for more than ten years, and
- **Ted Glover**, affectionately known as Birdman for seven years, who opened our eyes to the beauty and habits of our local birds.

We will miss you!
Applegater Board of Directors



Ted Glover



Pat Kellogg

Meet Amber Caudell, the *Applegater’s* advertising representative for Josephine County

Amber fell in love with the Williams valley when her family moved here in 1991. She returned to live here as an adult to raise her own family, two daughters and a son. “This area is just the best place I can think of to raise a family. The people here are wonderful. My kids got to attend school at Williams and Applegate; both are fantastic schools with great teachers.”

Amber recently graduated from the Arts Institute Online, where she got her associates degree in graphic design, and has launched a home business, Honeybee Art and Design. “Working with the *Applegater* lets me get to know the community better, and it is an excellent publication to help bring the community together. By advertising in the *Gater* we are promoting a stronger local economy. Give me a call or drop me an email so we can work together!”



If you need an ad created for the paper, or a business card, I can help with that too.”

You can reach Amber at 541-846-1027 or amercaudell@gmail.com.