

It was a good maple syrup season.

Making maple syrup is simple. Just collect the sap, concentrate it by heating or boiling, and bottle the syrup. Because it is so simple, virtually every maple syruper has their own technique. This is ours.

In the first photo, Gail is holding two jars of fresh syrup. Because of an unusually long sap run she made much more than the usual amount. The sap run started with a gush during an early March heat wave. Well, maybe not exactly a heat wave but two unusually warm days, March 5th and 6th.

On those two days alone, I collected 40 gallons of sap.

Then the temperature dropped and stayed cold for all but four days in March. Sap continued to run, but at a slower and intermittent pace.

There are four species of maple trees in Minnesota. They are the Sugar Maple, Red Maple, Silver Maple and the Boxelder. The Sugar Maple is the best for syrup making. Its sap has the highest sugar content.

Unfortunately, true Sugar Maples do not grow in our area. They are common in the metropolitan area and south. We do have an abundance of Red, Silver and Boxelder maples. Because there are plenty of Red Maples on the farm, I have never tapped Boxelder. I am told it makes a good maple syrup. Boxelders are common throughout most of Minnesota and the Midwest.

It is possible to make syrup from birch trees. A neighbor makes a fine birch syrup.

Ornamental maples do not make edible syrup.

The MN DNR has lots of good information on their website.

The second photo shows a frozen stream of sap. That was typical for most March mornings. If the day was sunny, that warmed the trees enough for a run. Most cloudy days were too cool for sap.

As you can see, I use five gallon pails, a homemade plastic spout and a spike to collect sap. The spout is simply a six-inch-long section of plastic pipe that I split-cut on a small bandsaw. I have used many different spouts including the expensive metal ones. The metal spouts were difficult to remove and sometimes broke in the tree. Plastic spouts cut from common water pipe are extremely cheap and easy to remove. So is a 16-penny spike. The economical pails are seamless and easy to clean.

Immediately after I collect the sap, I strain it through a cotton dish towel to remove bark, leaves and the bugs that tend to show up later in the harvest.

The third photo shows Gail's basic evaporating technique. It takes about forty gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. She does most of the evaporation using two large pans on top of the woodstove. The woodstove also heats the house. She can reduce over five gallons per day with this cost-free technique. The sap does not come to a boil on the wood stove. Nevertheless, it evaporates rapidly and adds welcome moisture to the house. When the sap has been reduced sufficiently, Gail carefully completes the reduction in the kitchen.

In the fourth photo, Gail is reducing the concentrated sap to syrup. There are all kinds of techniques for telling when the syrup is finished. If the boil is stopped too soon, the syrup will be watery. If boiled too long, the syrup will contain sugar crystals.

Gail has found the best way to get it right is to watch it closely and judge by a number of factors. Those factors include the aroma of the vapor, the size, the viscosity and the color of the bubbles. Her technique works well. Her syrup always tastes and looks beautiful.

In the final photo, Gail is pouring the warm syrup into jars through cheesecloth. Beginning syruperes are sometimes bothered by a cloudy layer that develops after the syrup is cooled. That cloudy material is just concentrated minerals. It is called "niter". It is harmless. The niter can be ignored or you can carefully pour off the amber syrup thus leaving the niter layer. It can be used or disposed as you prefer.

After the syrup cools, Gail puts the jars in the deep freeze until needed. She keeps one "open" jar in the refrigerator. In case you are wondering, freezing does not cause the jars to break.

This simple process yields enough delicious syrup for our household for a year. In addition to the obvious uses for maple syrup, Gail uses it to replace a portion of brown sugar or even white sugar in many recipes. The

maple syrup adds a wonderful flavor to foods while replacing the sugars that are so often produced from corn. If you have a native maple tree or even a boxelder available, you can make some syrup yourself. Depending on the type and size, you can make from a pint to a gallon from a single tree.

Best regards. Tom

P.S. From Brenda Kimberly-Maas

We harvest boxelder sap and cook it down. Ratio of sap to syrup is roughly 80:1, depending on the sugar content. We cook ours over an open wood fire. This adds a nice undertone of smokiness to it...not too much, just a nice touch.

Boxelder syrup tastes like a light molasses. Canadian friends call it "Manitoba Maple". It is really quite a nice syrup.

We've also made Birch syrup. It has a nutty flavor. I liken it to almond. Very delicious, but it does take quite a lot of sap to make syrup. 100:1 sap to syrup ratio.

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