

Tips for Welcoming Sugarhouse Visitors on Maple Weekend (or any time)

When getting ready for maple weekend, or for any time that you're welcoming customers to your sugarhouse, here are a few things to keep in mind.

Getting the word out

Promote yourself. Use Facebook, email lists, press releases to local newspapers, calls to your local chamber of commerce or other community organizations, and other methods to let people know that you'll be open for Maple Weekend. Invite your local town and state officials to stop by, as well as your local reporters.

Connect with other sugarhouses nearby and encourage visitors to stop by more than one sugarhouse by highlighting the different things each one has to offer.

Have large, clear signs at the end of your driveway and, if possible, at nearby intersections. Be sure to have complete directions on your website.

Sugarhouse

Be at your sugarhouse when you say you will be. Even if you're not boiling, customers will see your hours listed and may show up at any time within that window. If they arrive to find a locked sugarhouse they're not going to have a good impression of sugaramakers.

Be available by phone. Your phone and email address are in your listing, so customers may contact you in advance with questions. If you can't be by your phone or check your email, set up your voicemail or an auto-responder on your email to let people know that you'll get back to them

soon, and that you're open as advertised for the weekend.

Clean your sugarhouse. Yes, visitors love the rustic feel of some sugarhouses, but we are making a food product and they will notice rusty equipment, cobwebs, dust, oily clothes, or other unsanitary conditions. Those impressions will hurt your sales, and hurt the overall impression of the industry.

Wear something that identifies you as the owner, and have your family, staff, and volunteers do the same, so that visitors know who to direct their questions to.

Pay attention to your visitors. Greet people as they enter your sugarhouse, so they feel welcome.

Have something going on. If there's no sap, consider boiling water in your evaporator. Or make candy or cream, can syrup, or offer a cooking demonstration. Or offer a tapping demonstration.

Display antique sugarmaking equipment.

Offer tours of your operation, including your sugarbush, at set times. Include the sales area in your tours, and offer explanations of each product.

Consider some activities for children, such as a simple scavenger hunt, or coloring books.

Make some simple signs to hang near pieces of equipment explaining what they are used for. Sometimes you may be so busy that you can't answer

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everyone's questions at once.

Mark walking paths clearly, and remove as much snow and ice as possible. Use salt, sand, and wood chips on paths to ensure that your visitors can walk safely from their cars to the sugarhouse.

Mark parking areas clearly, to avoid having to pull visitors' cars out of ditches, and clear the snow and ice well. If you have staff or volunteers to direct drivers in the parking lot, that's even better.

Mark off areas in the sugarhouse that are off-limits to visitors, or that are particularly dangerous due to heat, etc. If you're concerned about liability, talk to your insurance agent in advance to make sure you have the proper coverage.

Have adequate lighting so visitors can see everything clearly.

Have some seating available for elderly visitors.

Have a restroom available, if possible.

Products

Offer a wide range of products. If you don't make candy or cream, consider buying wholesale product from a neighboring farm to sell.

Offer samples of all of your products. People who taste what you have for sale are far more likely to make purchases.

Demonstrate some examples of the versatility of maple syrup, like maple tea, maple milk, maple soda, maple lemonade, maple popcorn, etc.

Hang signs with allergen warnings. Even if you're only selling pure maple products, a sign that explains there are no allergens in pure maple syrup can be helpful.

Make sure to have business cards or brochures for customers to take home, so they remember where to go when they run out of the maple products they buy.

Offer literature with recipes and nutrition information for maple products.

Have a sign-in sheet and collect email addresses.

New Video Resources

The University of Vermont Extension has created the first two in a series of videos on grading fundamentals. "Flavor" and "Density" are available at http://www.uvm.edu/extension/agriculture/maple_publications_media, and "Color" and "Clarity" videos will soon be added to the collection. NAMSC is supporting these videos with a grant.

Each video features a presentation from Maple Specialist Mark

Isselhardt offering practical information about how to properly evaluate and grade maple syrup.

