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Tapping Red Maples

For maple syrup producers, sugar maple trees are the gold standard for sap production. This species of maple generally produces sap with higher sugar content than other maples, and in greater quantities. But not everyone is lucky enough to have a sizable stand of mature sugar maple trees handy for tapping, and sugar making is quite different from most crop growing in that you can't simply pick a spot and plant your crop (unless you are very patient). Fortunately, there are other sources of sap.

Red maple, also often called soft maple, is sugar maple's overlooked cousin. It too produces sap that can be boiled down to make maple syrup, and it is far more common in the Eastern U.S. than sugar maple. It grows faster and is more tolerant to a range of growing conditions than sugar maple. Allowing it to grow in sugar bushes ultimately promotes woodland health, since it's susceptible to different diseases and insect pests than sugar maples. Also in its favor: it's everywhere, and in great quantity.

On the flip side, red maples generate somewhat less sap than sugar maples, and usually with a lower sugar content—only by

half of a percent or less, though. It sometimes buds out earlier than sugar maple, producing cloudy sap that's not good for syrup production.

Lower sugar content, of course, means more work to concentrate the sap into syrup, which means more boiling time and so more fuel, and this additional cost should be considered. But sugar makers who use reverse osmosis (RO) to concentrate their sap before boiling should definitely be taking advantage of sap from red maples, as the RO process eliminates this concern. Even without an RO system, though, given a sugar maker's overall investment in equipment and the short window available for using it and making marketable products, consideration should be given to collecting all of the sap available and turning it into syrup.

As for the earlier budding, most sugar makers report that the sap usually stops running altogether before the buds start to burst, making this of little concern.

Tapping red maples requires a different set of guidelines than for sugar maples. The tapholes heal faster, but the trees are more

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susceptible to splits from taps being hammered in too hard, for instance. Researchers at Cornell University's maple program are looking into the impact of tapping on the health of red maples.

As for taste, there is enough anecdotal evidence of widely differing opinions to suggest that syrup made from sap from red maples, or a blend of sap from red and sugar maples, can be just as good as that made purely from sugar maples.

There are other species of maple that can yield good sap for boiling into syrup as well. Black maple, common in the Great Lakes region, can produce high quantities of excellent sap. Silver maples are tappable as well, but are inconsistent as to the quantity and sweetness of their sap. Norway maple, while often labeled as an invasive species, is common in some more densely populated areas, and can produce fine sap for sugar making, though it often turns cloudy earlier in the season than sap from other maples. Bigleaf maple, while not common in the Northeast, is the predominant maple species in the Northwest, and a growing number of sugar makers are tapping these trees, though the region's temperate climate limits sap flow.

What this means, in a practical sense, is that when sugar makers are running tubing and concentrating on getting to all of the sugar maples in their woods, they would do well to run lines to nearby red maples as well. **F**

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