

## Boiling it Down

by Winton Pitcoff

# Sap Now or Sawlogs Later?

**F**ew woodlot owners know their trees as well as sugar makers do. The hours spent running tubing, looking for leaks, and thinning, identifying and measuring trees give maple producers ample opportunities to get to know every stem in their forest and make plans for each of them—which ones to tap now, which to tap later, which are cull trees and which are potential moneymakers if sold for lumber.

There are differences in managing woodlands for lumber and for sugar bush. For example, the wide, thick crowns most desirable for productive maple trees are hard to come by in the densely stocked stands grown for lumber. However, the greatest difference comes from the need to keep tree trunks pristine to command the highest prices for lumber and the need to drill holes in those trunks for tapping. Tapping a tree for sap results in more maple product to sell every year, but tapholes diminish the tree's potential future value as a sawlog. Some mills even reject logs when they see evidence of tapping out of concern about possible embedded hardware that could damage a saw or its operator.

There are a number of factors to think about when deciding the destiny of trees. A younger tree will have more years of sap production ahead of it, which tilts the equation toward the value of tapping, as opposed to an older tree that has never been tapped and may be getting close to maturity as a clear sawlog. Trees in dense sugar bush require less labor and materials to tap than isolated ones that will need more tubing to reach, and so are more valuable to a sugar maker. Trees that already show some imperfections—curves, crotches, low branches—are already significantly devalued as lumber producers, but will still produce sap.

Investments in sugaring equipment only pay off if you have enough sap to turn into product, and letting trees mature for lumber is only a good idea if you know you'll still own the land when they're ready for harvest. There's a lot to consider.

Since tapping generally occurs only in the areas a person can reach, it tends to be the bottom 4 to 6 feet of a tree that end up with defects (holes and staining) from tapping. The trunk above this tapping zone won't be affected. However, it is the butt log—the first 16 feet of a trunk from the ground—that usually has the clearest wood and so has potential as a veneer log, commanding the highest price from a mill. The butt log is also most often the log upon which the entire tree's grade is based when a mill is determining value.

Sugar maples aren't ready for tapping until they're at least 12 inches around, giving a sugar maker ample time to identify trees that have potential veneer or high-value logs at their base and decide whether or not to tap them. Veneer logs aren't all that common, since they have to be superior in many ways. Trees with perfectly straight, round trunks with no branches in the lower 16 feet, and with absolutely no signs of damage to the bark, are required to command top dollar.

At the same time, there is some demand for "taphole maple," boards cut from maples that feature the holes and stains as part of the character of the wood. There are more maple butt logs than there is demand for these boards, so a woodlot owner shouldn't count on generating income from these logs, but neither should they be discounted as worthless. Many people, sugar makers in particular,



Photo by Winton Pitcoff.

While beautiful to some, taphole maple boards are less valuable than clear lumber.

appreciate the beauty of these boards. What better material to use to side your new sugarhouse?

In the end, the decision concerning how best to manage an individual tree is complex; you must weigh the potential for immediate annual income against long-term potential, while taking into account the vagaries of the ever-changing markets and prices for lumber and maple products.

The Cornell Maple Program developed an excellent tool in the form of a spreadsheet (available at <http://maple.dnr.cornell.edu/productvs/index.htm>). This allows woodlot owners to input data on the tree in question, the various financial variables in play, and a time horizon, and returns the value of the tree base in a range of scenarios, including cutting for cordwood or lumber and tapping. **F**

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