

Guidance for Maple Open House Events During COVID-19

Developed by Jason Lilley, Sustainable Agriculture Professional, University of Maine Cooperative Extension; Leigh Hallett, Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry; and Leah Cook, Food Inspection Supervisor Federal/State Inspection Service, Maine Department of Agriculture.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, many maple producers were forced to cancel open house events during the 2020 sugaring season for the safety of the producers and their customers. This caused a major loss in sales for many maple producers throughout the maple producing region. While COVID-19 is likely to still be a concern for the 2021 sugaring season, we now have a better understanding of the virus and protective measures to keep everyone safe while staying open for business. Those measures and best practices are detailed in this guidance.

Maple based events face a unique problem for safe sales during the COVID-19 outbreak. Typically, these events can draw a large number of customers to the sugarhouse in a short period. Historically, those customers spend a significant amount of time on-farm for events like sugarhouse tours, pancake breakfasts, syrup tastings and more. During the pandemic, new systems need to be developed and implemented to meet safety guidelines. These systems will keep sugaring families, staff, and customers safe at these events during this COVID-19 outbreak.

New protocols for sanitization, customer flow, and payment methods must be planned. Ultimately, the goal

is to:

1. Maximize space between household groups (more than 6’);
2. Minimize touch points; and
3. Implement systems to clean and disinfect areas of frequent contact.

Those plans then need to be clearly communicated to your customers.

Communication and Marketing to the Public (Pre-Arrival)

- Update your website and social media with clear communication about what customers can expect when at this event (see Social Media Best Practices in Times of Crisis [<https://extension.psu.edu/social-media-best-practices-in-times-of-crisis>]).
- Be positive in that communication.
- Show the community that you are using recommended practices for sanitation and distancing (e.g. avoid posting pictures from last year’s event that show a sugarhouse packed with people, or other images of crowds).
- Require customers to bring and wear a face covering.
- Instruct customers to stay home if they are feeling ill.

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- Consider sharing the CDC's COVID-19 Symptom Checker [<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>].
- Clarify your hours, if you are taking orders for pre-packed products on-line or over the phone, and anything else critical to the success of your system. Pre-packing products for customers can greatly decrease the amount of time that people are on the farm at one time.
- Specify special payment methods if applicable. (e.g. check and cards only.)
- Remember that most customers will be reassured by seeing that you are putting systems in place to keep them safe.

Determining the Safety of Entertainment Options (Pre-Planning)

When considering entertainment options to draw in customers, you will need to consider the level of risk inherent with that activity. Will it reduce customer flow and create crowded conditions? Will it involve people being inside, or needing to touch surfaces that several others are also touching? It will be up to you to evaluate whether you can create systems to minimize those risks, or whether it is safer to forgo certain activities this year.

- When you have selected potential activities, consider the Hierarchy of Control [<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/hierarchy/default.html>] in relation to the

activity. This system guides you through evaluating if there are alternatives or adjustments to make the option less likely to spread the disease. For example, instead of letting families walk through the sugarhouse, rope off the opened door and let them look in, or move a small evaporator outdoors for boiling demonstrations.

- Consider a few contingency plans for likely possible scenarios. (If it rains, what will you do? If you get a rush of visitors, how will you handle the crowds?)
- To minimize your risk, you may choose to only offer maple products for grab-and-go sales.

Serving Food and Offering Samples.

Serving food (such as breakfasts) on-site should be avoided. If you decide to offer on-site food, bear in mind the following:

- If serving food, be sure to check with your state's COVID-19 mandates. Some states are requiring actions such as:
 - Maintaining records of customers' contact information for contact tracing purposes,
 - Limiting group party size.
 - Limiting the total number of people in the facility and maximizing the spacing of guests.
 - Specifying that guests may remove their facemasks only when seated.
- If offering samples, some state

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have specific mandates related to offering food samples at this time. Whether mandated or not, best practice for offering samples include;

- Avoiding buffet and self-serve samples.
- Have a masked staff member hand out samples from behind a sneeze guard.
- Encourage guests to take their samples away from the collection area for tasting and reflecting.
- Have easily accessible trash cans and make sure that customers are disposing of their own tasting cups.
- Have a staff member trained to safely and regularly clean and disinfect all tables or high-touch surfaces.

Parking and Welcome Area Layout (Day of)

- Put up barriers and signage



Photo courtesy of Cooke's Maple Farm, Brunswick Maine.

posting your policies between your parking area and welcoming booth, plus barriers to keep the traffic flowing in one direction, minimizing person-to-person contact.

- Place the check-in far from the check-out area to prevent crossing traffic.
- Put markers every 6' on the ground, or along the barriers to designate space between customers, in case a line forms. Limit the total occupancy of indoor retail spaces. Check with your state's guidelines to see if they have set restrictions on the number of customers per retail space.
- Provide a handwashing station at the entrance and at a few locations around the sugarhouse.
 - Use these designs for building a low cost (\$20) handwashing station [<https://extension.umn.edu/growing-safe-food/handwashing-station>]. If that is not possible, provide hand sanitizer. Customers should be instructed to wash/sanitize hands before entering indoors spaces, and before consuming any food products.
- Identify surfaces that visitors are likely to touch frequently (tent posts, baskets, bench edges, etc.) and clean and disinfect (if possible) on a set schedule using an approved sanitizer. Bathroom facilities should be cleaned and disinfected on a regular and frequent schedule.
- Be sure to train your staff on these sanitization procedures.

Crowd Control Options

- Check your state guidelines to see if there is a limit on the number of persons for outdoor gatherings.
- Make a plan for how you will limit the number of customers allowed into each of your spaces at one time. (Customers may have to wait in their vehicles until others customers leave.)
- Train staff to uphold these rules and create a plan for positively responding to potential customer interactions resulting from requests to wait in line, or to wear a mask.
- Encourage a flow where customers are welcomed in one location, enter the sales area on

one side, then exit the area on the other side and pay separately. This will minimize interactions between customers who are entering and those who are exiting.

- Have products for sale near the parking area. This way customers who just want to buy products can avoid the more congested areas.
- Offer pre-orders by phone, email or online purchasing platform. Pre-pack those orders and have them ready for the customer to grab-and-go.

Checkout Options

- Have someone designated to

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handle money. Staff handling money and interacting with clients should wash their hands frequently and wear a face covering.

- Keep the check-out area separate from the welcome area to minimize crowding.
- Encourage contactless payment options.
- Consider these checkout options:
 - Drive-thru style checkouts, where staff can load products into the trunk of customers' cars. Payment can be made through the car window.
 - Plexiglass protected check-out: Install plexiglass between staff and customers. Sanitize the card reader often, on a set schedule.
 - Online payment: By setting up an online shopping and payment system, you can minimize these concerns. Be aware that this does increase staffing needs to pull and prepare orders.

Liability and Due Diligence

- Be sure to check with your insurance company to make sure that the activities that you have selected will be covered by your policy.
- Be sure to post the relevant signage about liability limits prominently.
- During any season, be sure to do a safety walk through before opening to the public to address tripping hazards, chemical stor-

age, electrocution hazards, keys removed from equipment and implements down, etc.

Other resources:

- Agritourism Safety Checklist [<http://umash.umn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Agritourism-Farm-Safety-Check.pdf>]
- Managing the Safety Risks of Agritourism Farms [<http://agritourism.rutgers.edu/pdfs/Module%204%20-%20Farm%20Safety.pdf>]

Final Thoughts

While there is great potential for these events, all participating producers must take the risk involved seriously. Many producers may choose to minimize this risk by only offering maple products for grab-and-go sales only. Others may choose more involved entertainment options, but must do so with careful planning. Developing those plans to maximize space between people (> 6'), to minimize touch points, and to clean and disinfect areas of frequent contact will ensure everyone's safety and a successful event.

If you have questions about your event planning process, do not hesitate to reach out to Jason Lilley at UMaine Cooperative Extension for support at jason.lilley@maine.edu or (207) 781-6099.