

Tapping into Sappy Non-Timber Forest Products for Fun and Profit



Photo by: George V. Cooke, Freelance Photographer

I imagine that one thing National Woodlands magazine readers have in common is that many of you own woodlands. And, I imagine that most of the members of the National Woodlands Owners Association subscribe to a management philosophy designed to "... ensure a sustainable managed forest resource in the United States." If either of these apply to you, keep reading this article.

Growing trees is a long-term endeavor. As woodland owners and foresters we are a patient lot. There are times, however, when we might wish we could squeeze a little income out of those trees on their way to the large sawlog class. There are also more than pecuniary reasons we might own and manage woodlands, and that's where the fun comes in along with the profit. What I am proposing in this article is that woodland owners consider sap and syrup production as a way to increase the financial benefits derived from their forest resource by tapping their

trees, and increase the fun in owning a woodlot with a good "sugarin of" party.

Sap to syrup; maple of course. Everyone knows that maple syrup, or more precisely maple sap used to make syrup, comes from maple trees. Globally, maple syrup is a 1.24 billion dollar industry. In the United States there are estimated to be more than 9,000 maple farms, and all of them, quite naturally, have a woodlot. What is less known is that the classic sugaring tree, the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), is only one species within the *Acer* genus that can be tapped. Maple syrup is also made from red maple (*Acer rubrum*), silver maple (*Acer saccharinum*), black maple (*Acer nigrum*), and Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*). There is also growing interest in tapping box elder (*Acer negundo*), our compound leafed maple tree also called Manitoba maple. Taken together, that expands the industry potential well past its traditional New England roots. And recent research conducted through the USDA Acer Access and Development Program (Acer) shows a potential for syrup production from bigleaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*), adding the Pacific Northwest to the regions where consumers could "buy local" to supply their syrup needs.

Woodland owners have many avenues for adding sap and syrup production to their management planning. In addition to investing in the processing equipment to go in the maple syrup business they can rent trees to a nearby maple syrup producer to tap, or harvest and sell sap to a nearby producer. There are also ample resources available to any woodland owner considering sap or syrup production. The science behind the sweetness is available at the North American Maple Syrup Council's site maplere-search.org. Both The University of Vermont's Proctor Maple Research Center (<https://tinyurl.com/fp4fjs8s>) and the Cornell University Maple Program (blogs.cornell.edu/cornellmaple/) have how to videos and extension materials.

Sap to Syrup; why stop with maple? So, you own a woodlot without a lot of maple? Not to despair. There are other species out there. There is a long history in the Scandinavian countries, Siberia and in Alaska of tapping birch. White birch (*Betula papyr-*

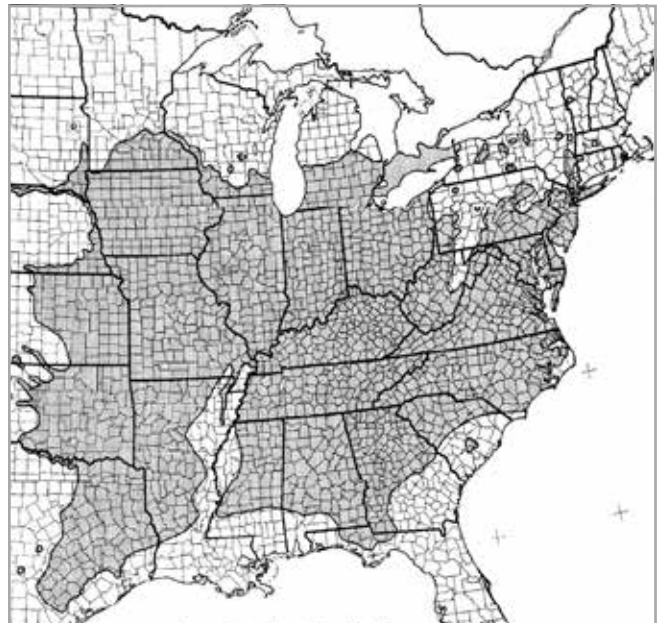
ifera), yellow birch (*Betula alleghaniensis*) and black birch (*Betula lenta*) all run a sweet sap that can be boiled down to make syrup. With fructose instead of sucrose as the major form of sugar, birch sap is a little harder to evaporate without scalding. So, why bother? The Scandinavian countries, Russian Siberia and Alaska are all major producers of birch sap, which is as often as not drunk as a health drink. Birch sap is low cal, rich in vitamins, nutrients and naturally filtered through the trunk of the trees. It is quickly replacing coconut water as the healthy alternative from the north. But then again, it is hard to grow coconuts up there.

But how about if your woodlot is not up north? Tree tapping could still be in your future. Our southern states, down through Appalachia and out into the Midwest have an abundance of walnut trees (*Juglans nigra*) ready to tap. And yes, walnut syrup tastes really good. Although not as prolific a sap producer as maple, the price of walnut syrup more than makes up the difference. Whereas maple syrup is selling wholesale for around \$25/gallon, walnut syrup is bringing in over \$250/gallon.

Don't like the idea of drilling a hole in a potentially valuable walnut log? Try tapping sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*). Making sycamore syrup is an all but forgotten Appalachian folk tradition. Often growing along stream beds, sycamore is not thought of as a high value timber crop. With a little coaxing, through the application of vacuum to the sap lines, collecting sycamore sap and sycamore syrup production can be a way to bring profit from this resource while assuring the ecological benefits from well protected riparian zones. And the taste? Some say it is the best of them all, especially if your taste buds have a more southern twist.

Tapping these alternative tree species is a new/old endeavor. Just as heritage crops are reintroducing us to once common regional flavors, alternative tree syrups are adding new flavors to our "foodie" economy. In theory, sweet sap will flow from a deciduous tree classified by wood scientists as diffuse porous. That includes those mentioned in this article as well as others. Don't bother tapping an oak, ash or hickory. They belong to the ring porous classification and do not have a sweet sap in the springtime. And stay away from the coniferous trees, that is unless you like the flavor of turpentine.

Coaxing the sap out of those non-maple diffuse porous trees and the practical aspects of sap and



The native range of black Walnut (*Juglans nigra*). Source: USDA Forest Service, Southern Research Station.

syrup production are still being figured out. Scientists at Future Generations University's Appalachian program, Cornell University's Maple Program and the University of New Hampshire are all engaged in studies to increase sap productivity and syrup processing efficiency. And, the market for these specialty products is growing. Tonoloway farm in Virginia (tonolowayfarm.com/) and New Leaf Tree Syrups (newleaftreesyrups.com/) with operations in Vermont and New York offer an expanding line of alternative tree syrup products.

Even if sap and syrup production is not in your future, I encourage you to grab a drill, get outside and tap a few trees for the pure joy of watching the sap flow. Catch that sap in most any container you might have and start boiling, preferably not on your kitchen stove. It may take a while, but eventually your concentrating concoction will start to get sweet. Pour it on pancakes, ice cream or mixed in a good drink and it will be sure to put a smile on your face. But watch out. There are probably more trees like that in your woodlot, and if not careful you might just catch "the sugar bug."



Mike Rechin is the Maple Commodity Specialist with the Appalachian Program of Future Generations University, Franklin West Virginia. He works with tree tappers throughout the region to advance the syrup industry and understand more about trees.