

THE ORGANIC SUGARBUSH *reprinted from Farming, Journal of Northeast Agriculture*
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Whatever sugarmakers may think of the concept, organically certified maple syrup is here to stay. For the consumers who have little idea about how syrup is actually made, the word organic on a maple product is reassuring. Large companies that buy maple as an ingredient are often uneasy about the fact that syrup is made in thousands of individual sites, and they look for a standard that they are familiar with. Organic generally means the same thing to most people—the food is grown in an environment that is free from synthetic chemicals, including herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers, and the part that is consumed contains only “natural” ingredients. What is somewhat less well understood, with respect to maple, is the organic standard that relates to how maple sap is harvested. This column is not meant to be a criticism of the organic maple process, but only to point out that in attempting to establish criteria for organic certification of maple operations, there are still some wide disagreements among certifying agencies over how to regulate behavior that is unique to maple.

In the US, the various agencies that certify maple as organic use as a guideline the USDA National Organic Program wild crop harvesting standards. These standards simply state that, in addition to allowing no prohibited substances (chemicals) in the area of harvest, a wild crop must be harvested in a sustainable manner which is non-destructive to the environment. From this brief description, various agencies have interpreted sustainability in terms of tapping guidelines, the use of vacuum, and so on. Guidelines for what sugarmakers can do in their woods run from the vague to the very specific, and the degree to which various practices are allowed depends on where you live and who certifies your sugarbush. For example, if you operate one of the 40 sugarbushes certified by Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Assoc. (MOFGA) you are allowed one tap in a tree 10-20” dbh, and more taps in large trees. If you operate one of 20 sugarbushes certified by Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY) you can put one tap in a 10” tree, and add a tap for every 4” in diameter (leading to possibly 3 taps in an 18” tree). Vermont Organic Farmers (VOF), with 91 certified sugarbushes, allows one tap (with a health spout) in a tree 9-14” dbh, and smaller trees can be tapped if marked for thinning in your management plan. If you use larger spouts, the minimum diameter is 12”. Ecocert Canada, one of the largest organic certifiers in that country, allows one tap in a tree 8-16” in

diameter. Taphole depth is specified by many certifiers, for example the maximum is 1.5” below the bark in Canada, and VOF says holes should be “as shallow as possible,” but “renewing” or “freshening” the hole by drilling to some unspecified additional depth midway through the season is allowed by Ecocert and NOFA-NY. In Maine you can put nails in trees, if kept to “a minimum” but you can’t put paint on the tree trunk “because paint is a synthetic substance.” VOF considers each nail in a maple tree as a tap, thereby reducing the allowed amount in that tree. Ecocert recently dropped a requirement that vacuum be kept at a maximum of 20” mercury at the spout; MOFGA states that it is permitted to use vacuum that does not exceed 20” at the spout; and NOFA-NY states that with vacuum “producers should maintain as low a pressure as possible.” Presumably, that means the least vacuum, not the most negative pressure. MOFGA and Ecocert state that spouts must be removed within 60 days of the end of sugaring. Ecocert forbids grazing by farm animals in the sugarbush; VOF allows grazing as long as “long-term damage” is avoided.

The desire by organic certifiers to promote sustainability in the sugarbush is not a bad idea, it is just, as these examples illustrate, a somewhat disorganized process in the maple world. While some maple certifiers, such as the New Hampshire Department of Agriculture, and the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, do not attempt to regulate sugarbush practices unrelated to prohibited substances, the various agencies mentioned in the paragraph above all have as a goal the protection of forest health through good management practices. Recurring themes in these guidelines include the encouragement of species diversity, careful monitoring of tree vigor and reduction of tapping when trees are stressed, and the even distribution of tapholes around the trunk. VOF requires a forest management plan written by or approved by a certified forester in order to promote stand vigor and the protection of soils and waters in the sugarbush.

There is currently an effort underway on both sides of the border to standardize organic rules for maple. While the rules may take several years to be accepted by all parties, hopefully there will one day be unified organic rules for sap collecting and woods management that are satisfactory to almost all sugarmakers.