

One way that maple producers can gain useful information is by attending the educational programs put on by Extension in conjunction with county and state maple organizations, where speakers include not just university and government specialists, but also sugarmakers who share their knowledge and experience. One of the best presentations last year in Vermont was by Steve Wheeler of Westfield, VT. Steve and his wife Amy boil from about 7500 taps, and run a very successful specialty food business (Wheeler Sugarworks Inc.) with many unusual maple and non-maple products. Steve's talk covered 10 subjects that sugarmakers don't always consider when preparing for another year of high production. The topics ranged from 'Is it profitable to lease taps, or to buy sap?' to 'Have you taken all steps to ensure retail product quality?' to 'Does it make sense for you to be certified organic?' Some of these subjects are worthy of a whole column, and you will hear more about them in the future. Here are highlights from some of the other topics Steve covered.

Every year prepare for some sort of disaster. What are you going to do when your vacuum pump gives out on a Saturday night in the middle of the biggest sap run? Do you have an extra or do you know the phone number of an electrician who will rescue you? When the power fails after a windstorm, will you have a generator handy, or know where to borrow one? Do you have extra pans or know what you will do when yours need immediate repair? What is the plan when you run out of firewood or tank space? How about when you break the mercury thermometer (get rid of it now before this happens!). Do you have spares of important items, like hydrometers? The moral: take a moment to think of as many potential problems and their best short-term solutions as possible each year, and write out a plan. A quick reference to a phone number may get you back up and running sooner, and the peace of mind of having the plan in place is worth something too.

Visitors to the sugarhouse during sugaring can bring you increased sales but require plenty of forethought. Sometimes you need to have more than the right liability insurance. It's cute to see a young child carry a stick or two to the evaporator, but you definitely don't want to see the child get hurt by a falling woodpile. Steve related several precautionary tales from his operation, such as the night that two highly intoxicated visitors dropped by and were so enthusiastic about maple production that they needed to be body-blocked from falling into the evaporator. Another day, visitors came by and their kids decided to go sliding on the spring fed pond out back, which was only barely frozen. Fortunately they were noticed in time. A group of young enthusiastic foreign exchange students came in, rushed over and stuck their heads under the steam hood to inhale the steam, nearly scalding their faces, then jumped back and hit their heads on the edge of the hood. At an open house, the Wheelers had to stop a child from feeding maple crème donuts to the family horse. Make sure you have liability for all possible circumstances, but moreover, try to keep your visitors safe by using barriers and such to head them in the right direction. You cannot predict human behavior, but an ounce of prevention may pay off in the end.

Beware of introducing allergens or off flavors to your syrup. Many people have food allergies and some things that used to be recommended, such as adding a bit of butter or cream to keep the foam down, are unwise, as some people are highly allergic to dairy. You wouldn't think of adding peanut oil as a defoamer, but likewise don't stand by the evaporator eating your peanut butter sandwich while you expound to your friends on the great season and possibly spray food bits into the syrup (yes, it can happen). I visited a sugarhouse a few years ago and noticed a wire rack in the flue pan. "Oh, that's how we cook the hot dogs—they're delicious that way," was the explanation. I'm sure they were, but hotdog tainted syrup is not a good thing. Essentially, eating and drinking in front of and cooking using the evaporator should be avoided, and try to keep allergens out of the sugarhouse.

Whether to sell retail or bulk is not always an easy decision. This year, with bulk prices so high, some people are literally buying syrup in the jug from neighbors who don't have a good retail outlet, and pouring it into a barrel to sell, at a profit. If you are selling retail, there are a lot of costs you might not be including, besides the cost of the jug and syrup. Holding syrup for repacking could mean a loss of grade, and (some years) less money. If your retail business depends on buying bulk, you may end up paying more for it than you expected. Do you account for syrup shrinkage, the syrup that doesn't come out of the drum, gets spilled, etc.? Every label costs money to buy and time to apply, the fuel and time to reheat syrup for packing costs money, the trips to buy supplies, to visit the retail outlets take time and fuel etc. If you say your time is free, that's great, but that's not much of a business model. The Wheelers have a couple of employees and know just how much it costs to fill a bottle or package a box of candy. If you can make enough money to cover the hidden costs associated with your production level and you have the markets and the time available to meet them, sell the finished product. Otherwise, bulk can be profitable with much less work involved.

You can learn about many aspects of maple production from presentations like this one at state-wide maple educational programs. This year, Vermont will hold its January maple conferences on 3 Saturdays, January 10th at Bellows Falls High School, January 17th at Lamoille Union H.S. in Hyde Park, and January 24th at Middlebury H.S. Details are in the Maple Mainline, at <http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmapple/> See you there!