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Maple Sugaring Hints and Tips from The Nature Place

Coming down to us from the Native Americans, Sugaring Time is a joyous way to celebrate the change of seasons, to enter and participate in earth's rhythms. And it's FUN.

1. First you need a maple tree! Sugar maple is the best (thus the name) but other kinds of maples will do, i.e. Silver Maple, Norway Maple, Swamp or Red Maple. Google maple tree or maple sugaring and you can get all kinds of photos and information about how to identify maples. Remember 'MAD Horse' - maple, ash, dogwood, horse chestnut - these are the only trees (not shrubs) in our area with opposite branching. Look toward the ends of branches to notice this branching pattern. The buds of the sugar maple are brown and pointed. If you are not sure if your tree is a maple, bring us (The Nature Place) a small branch/twig sample to identify.
2. The traditional tapping date in our area has been Washington's birthday but, depending on the weather, you may want to tap earlier. Some people tap toward the end of January.
3. Tapping weather is cold nights and warmer days. This contrast in temperatures is what makes the sap start moving within the tree.
4. Sugaring time can last from mid-February to the 3rd or even 4th week of March, when the night time temperatures do not venture down much past 32 degrees on a consistent basis.
5. Tap a tree that is 14 or more inches in diameter, no smaller. Two taps, at the most, can be put in a tree that is 20 or more inches in diameter.
6. Use a 7/16 inch drill bit, hold the drill slanting slightly upward (so the hole will be slanting slightly downward) and drill about 1.5 inches into the tree.
7. Choose a tree that looks like it is in good shape. An unhealthy tree would show dead, decaying or fallen branches; obvious dead spots on the trunk; one that has been stressed by draught, storms or other factors.
8. Drill your hole anywhere on the tree. I prefer the south side because that side will warm up first thanks to the sun. Don't drill into discolored wood or too near an old tap hole.
9. Drill evenly, slowly and without wobbling. You want the spout to fit snugly.

10. Hammer the spout in with soft/medium blows until it fits tightly. Don't 'pound' it in - you could injure the tree and mess up the hole so that the spout will not fit snugly.

11. Don't drill in really cold weather. The wood can more easily crack.

12. After drilling, clean out any pieces of wood in the hole in order to make for a 'clean' hole.

13. Hang your bucket. Improvise some sort of lid to keep out rain and snow.

14. Collect and boil the sap as soon as you can. Refrigerate/keep cool the sap if you have collected it and will not be boiling it for a day or two.

15. Sap is maybe 98% or so water. The boiling is intended to evaporate away much of that water and to concentrate the sugar. If you boil in your kitchen be sure to provide for good ventilation!

16. 40 parts of sap will boil down to one part of syrup. As you boil, the sap remaining will turn a darker color, the steam will smell sweeter and when it gets really low (and darker) in the pot - DO NOT WALK AWAY! Watch it!

When the sap/syrup in the pot reaches 7 degrees above the boiling point of water (for most of us: 212 plus 7 = 219) then you have syrup. Or you will know it is syrup when it looks like syrup, smells like syrup and tastes like syrup!

17. Further cooking of the syrup will yield maple sugar candy and other such confections.

18. Store the syrup in a glass jar in the refrigerator, if you haven't devoured it all within 5 minutes of making it!

19. You will know sap season is over when: the sap looks a little off-color and also has an off-taste; it stops dripping for some days in a row; the buds start to open.

20. Pull the spout out and do nothing to the hole. It will heal by itself.

21. Give the tree a big, sappy hug.

Some last sugaring thoughts or reminders:

Keep everything as clean as possible, i.e. drill bit, bucket, boiling pot, spout.

Bugs, bark and other things might get into your bucket of sap. You can strain it through a pillow case to remove non-sap items.

If you desire, you can strain through cheesecloth your finished syrup (I do it before it has turned to syrup so it is a bit more watery) to get rid of what is called 'sugar sand', harmless chemical precipitates in the syrup.