



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Maple Sugaring in Rhode Island

Date: March 5, 2010

Location: Spring Hill Sugar House
522 Gardner Road, Richmond

Background

From late February through early April, farmers in Rhode Island honor an old New England tradition. They take to the woods with drills, tubing, and buckets to gather the sap from sugar maple trees, boiling it down to pure maple syrup.

The sugar maple tree, “acer saccharum,” is a sturdy native of the northeastern United States and was growing here in abundance long before the first colonists arrived. The settlers learned sugaring from the Indians, who collected sap in hollowed-out logs and steamed away the water by dropping it on hot stones.

Today, much care is taken to produce maple syrup of uniform quality and superlative flavor. Gathering and tapping operations recognize the need to preserve the delicate balance of the sugar orchard. Properly cared for sugar maples can be tapped at 40 years of age and will yield sap for 100 years or more. The modern evaporator, with its wood or oil fire, helps the farmer control the quality of the product. Syrup is checked for density, color and taste before it is graded to Federal standards and sold.

New equipment to speed the handling of highly perishable, raw sap is always being tried. However, the formula for making maple syrup is still the same: Take a sizeable stand of sugar maple trees. Add warm days and freezing nights. Gather the sap as it moves inside the trees, and bring it to the sugarhouse. “Boil ‘til it’s done” – until you make the day’s “Run” (a whole day’s flow of sap) into syrup. Do this almost every day, sometimes day and night, for four to six weeks, until the nights no longer freeze.

Although the boiling season occurs only from late February to early April, demand for pure maple products continues to increase. Currently, four farmers offer maple syrup for sale in Rhode Island: Charlie's Sugarhouse and Robert Harmon, both in Greene, Kingston Syrup in Kingston, and Spring Hill Sugar House in Richmond. The list and telephone numbers for each is available on the DEM website, www.dem.ri.gov, by clicking on “Agriculture in RI” on the left of the homepage, then “For Consumers,” then “Honey and Maple Syrup” under the list of Farms by Specialty. The link is <http://www.dem.ri.gov/programs/bnatres/agricult/pdf/risweets.pdf>

Rhode Island made maple syrup is also available for purchase at farmers' markets and roadside stands throughout the state, including the Wintertime Coastal Growers Market at Lafayette Mill in North Kingstown, and the Pawtucket Wintertime Farmers' Market located at Hope Artiste Village at 1005 Main Street .in Pawtucket.

Making Maple Syrup at Spring Hill Sugar House in Richmond

Rhode Islanders may be familiar with the Spring Hill Sugar House on Gardner Road in Richmond. For the past 22 years, Howard "Gibby" Fountain has been tapping maple trees and making maple syrup at this rustic sugar house on the Exeter line. This year, he set up 1,150 taps and started tapping maples the second week in February. Gibby and his crew, which includes his wife and children, collect the sap and then boil the water out of the sap to make maple syrup. As a result of the thick January frost and cold temperatures the region had in February, the sugar content in this year's sap is a bit lower than usual. With this, about 50 gallons of sap are needed to make a gallon of pure maple syrup. During an average year, it takes about 44 gallons of sap to make a gallon of syrup. Last year, Spring Hill Sugar House produced 180 gallons of pure maple syrup. So far this year, about 70 gallons have been produced at the sugar house.

The syrup is available for purchase at the sugar house store on the property, and comes in a variety of sizes ranging from a half gallon to a half pint. The store is open daily from 11 am -4 pm.

Interviews:

Howard "Gibby" Fountain of Spring Hill Sugar House provided an overview and demonstration of what's involved in making maple syrup.

Ron Newman of DEM's Division of Agriculture, discussed how DEM supports maple sugaring in Rhode Island and where consumers can purchase this local product.