

Robert McDonald's Red Maple trees keep him running

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February in some areas is the time when the groundhog predicts the end of winter. March is known for its winds which blow in April's spring showers. Undoubtedly a warmer season is close at hand.

For Robert McDonald, and other maple syrup producers who work on a much larger scale than he, the end of February and the weeks of March usually mean the start to finish process of extracting sap and making syrup.

While most syrup makers use Sugar Maple trees, Chester County forester Jeffrey Kelley pointed out that McDonald was using Red Maple trees on his Honey Brook property for his own syrup supply. McDonald explained that this is the third year he has tried syrup making on his nine acre homestead.

"I do this on a really small scale. I have read government publications, made my own equipment and tried different ways of evaporating. The labor I put into it would not be practical for a commercial business. This happens to be something I can do this time of year when there is nothing much else to do," he explained.

To compare or point out the very small scale of his syrup making, he explained that Vermont syrup producers use Sugar Maples which are not native to this area and which have a sugar content in their sap of twice that of the Red Maple McDonald uses.

"It takes forty gallons of Sugar Maple sap to make one gallon of syrup. It takes eighty gallons of Red Maple sap to make a gallon of syrup," he explained.

Large syrup producers in Vermont, New York and Canada have extensive acreage and tree populations to work with, while McDonald says he tapped only 250 trees this spring.

Because he is doing things on a much smaller scale than commercial producers, he has kept his investments to a minimum by using left over plastic tubing, plastic and glass gallon jugs, a brace and bit for drilling holes by hand, a wood fire for evaporating fuel and a propane burner for finishing. In addition to these necessities, he has fashioned a large evaporator tray and finishing kettle from stainless steel. He also contributes many hours of carrying pails of sap from the trees to the storage barrels and tending the evaporating fire.

Two years ago, McDonald said he experimented with the sap collecting and syrup making by using only twenty trees. The sap was cooked down to syrup consistency in a kettle on the woodstove McDonald had made to heat his home. "We boiled it down over several days time and got one half a gallon of clear, dark, very sweet syrup," he recalled.

Last year he used more trees and produced six gallons of sweet liquor to supply their cooking needs for the year and to give to a few neighbors. Last year's syrup was evaporated on a wood fire outside and finished or cooked to its final consistency on the electric stove in the kitchen.

This year he will finish the syrup on a propane burner because the cost of electricity is so high, he said.

Although the government has exacting standards for grading maple syrups which are commercially produced, McDonald concerns himself mainly with evaporating the sap to the right consistency or thickness of the syrup. A gallon of maple syrup should weigh eleven pounds, according to accepted standards. When his syrup weighs that much he knows enough water has been evaporated out of the collected sap. When working with red maples, there are 79 gallons of water to one gallon of syrup.

McDonald supplies the wood fuel for the evaporating fire from the timber he has thinned out of his wooded property. He also heats his home with wood. He and his wife, Agnes, have made their former weekend cabin into their home since his retirement as a steam fitter. He and his wife both originally came from South Philadelphia and have found the rural setting pleasant for retirement.

Having transformed the log cabin into a cozy homestead

by creating many pieces of wood furniture, heating with a wood stove, decorating with warm reds and blues in the carpets and drapes, and bringing into it the produce of their own garden, henhouse, fishpond and forest, they have worked toward a goal of becoming less dependent on industry and more self-sufficient.

"I know I'll never be totally self-sustaining, but I am having fun trying," McDonald said with a smile. "To put all this labor into the syrup is crazy you might say, but I have nothing better to do," he added.

While a tour of the woods and its tapped trees was interrupted by a pair of surveyors searching out the west boundaryline in the woods, Agnes McDonald explained that the trees are tapped the last week of February and the sap is collected until the end of March. The sap this year had started to flow on schedule, but after only a few days, the temperature dropped well below freezing and the sap stopped running. At the time of the interview, the sap was frozen in the jugs.

McDonald said he uses a brace and bit to bore the holes into the tree side by hand. Depending on the diameter of the tree, more than one tap can be placed in a single tree. "If the tree is ten inches in diameter it can have one tap." "If it is fifteen to twenty inches in diameter it can have two taps." "Even larger trees can have three taps," McDonald said.

After the tap hole has been bored out, McDonald inserts a sterilized plastic hose into the hole and uses a putty-like material to seal around the hose so that the sap will not leak out around the point of entry into the bark.

A glass or plastic gallon jug is then hung on a nail by its handle and the other end of the tubing is placed down into the neck of the jug.

When the sap is running, McDonald goes through the woods twice a day collecting the sap by pouring it from the jugs into plastic five-gallon pails, then carrying them to larger collecting barrels. When he has accumulated the day's sap, he cooks down the sap over the wood fire. When most of the water has boiled out, he takes it to a propane fueled burner to finish to syrup consistency. After the proper weight of eleven pounds to the gallon has been reached, the hot syrup is poured into glass canning jars and sealed until later use.

Pure maple syrup, not the maple-flavored liquids commonly marketed as maple pancake syrup, is presently valued at ten dollars a gallon, McDonald explained. Agnes added that the syrup is very sweet and goes a long way as a sugar replacement.

The trees naturally heal themselves within a year's time. New taps have to be made each year in a different area of the trunk usually three or four feet from the ground. Hoses or spouts are cleaned in a chlorine and water solution to discourage bacteria and disease.

The sap contains a bacteria which will grow and cause inferior syrup unless the sap is collected daily and boiled down as soon as possible. The taking of the sap from a healthy tree does not impair its growth, McDonald said. He and his wife are proponents of organic gardening and are ever conscious of the effect they and their lifestyle have on their environment so McDonald does not use pellets which commercial producers use to retard the healing process at the tap hole which in turn keep the sap running longer.

There is a lot of walking and carrying heavy pails of sap to and fro in his nine acre site, but Robert McDonald looks forward to the clear, sweet syrup he gets for his own use from his trees.



McDonald collects the sap in gallon jugs. The sap is clear or white in appearance. When it is cooked down it turns the characteristic amber color.



This is the evaporating woodfire site in McDonald's woodlot. McDonald built it himself, including the large stainless steel evaporating tray seen directly above the wood. Smoke from the fire is drawn off by the smoke stack. The large white plastic barrels are used to hold the collected sap. It takes 80 gallons of sap from red maples to make 1 gallon of syrup.

Homestead Notes



Berks Co. Society 5

The February meeting of Berks Society 5 was held at the home of Barbara Ratz, Richland.

Members answered the roll call by telling the most treasured gift they received from their husband.

Kenneth Moyer, insurance agent, presented a program on safety.

The Men's Night held at Risser's Diner, Stouchsburg,

was a hit. The group was entertained by the Old Town Minstrels.

The group will celebrate their 15th anniversary March 14, at Host Church, R2 Bernville.

A bus trip to New York City will be held May 3.

The group will sponsor a Ham on Roll sale April 26. Orders can be placed with Carolyn Feeg.

The group decided to donate \$25.00 to the American Lukemia Society in honor of Betty Newswanger.

The next meeting will be held March 24 at the home of Ella Bicksler, Bernville.

Berks Co. Society 7

The February meeting of Berks Society 7 was held at

the home of Dorothy Stricker, R1 Robesonia. Members answered roll call with their favorite cherry desserts.

President Gayle Eiler reminded the members of the Bake Sale to be held on March 13, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at Boscov's West in Sinking Spring.

The Adult Farmers and Farm Women Banquet on March 21 at 7:00 p.m. will be held at Tulpehocken Church, Millardsville.

An invitation was received from Group 5 to attend their 15th Anniversary at Host Church, R1 Womelsdorf on March 14, at 7:30 p.m. And also from Group 1 to attend their 40th anniversary at the Berks County Ag Center, R1 Leesport at 7:15 p.m.

The next meeting will be at the home of May Blatt, R1 Robesonia at 8:00 p.m. with

Harriet Gelsinger as co-hostess. Judy Ziegler will demonstrate Egg Scratching.

Berks Co. Society 9

The February meeting of Group 9, Berks County Farm Women, was held in the home of Mrs. Sue Hendricks, Amityville.

Plans for the Group's tenth anniversary celebration were continued. An invitation to Group 1's fortieth anniversary was received.

The program was a slide presentation given by Mike Slade of Nolde State Forest on winter birds and their habits.

On March 1st, the Group sold refreshments at the auction at Kuser's Mill.

The next meeting will be

held at Mrs. Nancy Lehmann's home. Members are asked to bring their favorite nutritional dish.

Cumberland Co. Society 10

The February meeting of Cumberland Society 10 was held recently at the home of Ethel Thomas, Newville R2.

Roll call was answered by reading from the oldest valentine each member had.

The group gave donations to the National Hemophilia Foundation, the Claremont Auxiliary and Teen Challenge. A total of 80 bed pads were made as part of the program for the evening.

The next meeting will be held March 20 at 7:30 p.m. at the home of Jane Keefer, Shuppensburg R1.

Cumberland Co. Society 15

Cumberland County Group 15 held its February meeting at the home of Cheryl Barrick, Carlisle.

Roll call was answered by telling something about Lincoln or Washington.

We then discussed how many of the women wanted to take a bus to York.

A letter was received from Claremont Farms asking if we would like to be a sponsor for 1980.

A bus trip to Williamsburg Pottery sponsored by Group 17 from York was discussed.

Judy Allen demonstrated macrame towel hanger making.

The March meeting will be held on March 20 at the home of Janice Yorlets, Carlisle.

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