



# Flotsam Farm

## Bringing **TRADITION** to life with **SORGHUM SYRUP, YOUTH, AND COMMUNITY**



Pressing sorghum cane produces a juice that is strained before being boiled down into syrup. The high sugar content plant was traditionally processed in the Ozarks into a syrup that was used as a sweetener before sugar was widely available or affordable. Dez Fleck of the Ozarks Wildskool was one of about 40 students and volunteers that helped with the process, which took about a day, including several hours of boiling to reduce the squeezings into syrup.

Jeffrey Goss, in overalls at left, leads Comet in circles as the horse powers a sorghum cane press. The press crushes the cane that is being fed into it at the left. The juices that are squeezed out run down a sluice and are collected for boiling into syrup.

By Kimberly Langston

**W**ith a focus on sustainability and passing down traditional food preparation methods, the Eric and Amelia LaMair of Flotsam Farm were recently awarded a grant used to raise sorghum cane and process it into syrup using traditional methods, including a horse-drawn cane press and boiling down the syrup over an open flame for hours.

The process was completed Aug. 28 with the involvement of Ozarks Wildskool students, age two to 18, resulting in sweet success and a product that was an area tradition before mass produced sugar was widely available and affordable.

Sorghum cane, a grass resembling bamboo, is the starting point for sorghum syrup, which is harvested and cleaned of leaves, seeds, and stems before being fed into a press that squeezes juice from the cane.

The sorghum press used in the Flotsam Farm project is an antique loaned by Jon Kruger, a member of the Ozarks Neighborly Exchange, and in this case powered by horses and ponies. Kruger says the press belonged to A.B. Morrison, and Dale Morrison was the last to own it before he bought it. The patent date on the mill is 1890, a Chattanooga #12 free roller mill. When Kruger bought it in 2014, it hadn't been used since 1962.

The pulpy material left over after the cane is pressed is called pomace or bagasse, and can be fed to livestock.

The juice that is pressed from it is strained twice to remove dirt and other impurities before being cooked down to a 10 to 1 ratio. For example, about 10 gallons of juice will be reduced to about a gallon of sorghum.

Flotsam Farm grew about an eighth of an

acre of sorghum and Amelia LaMair estimated they would get about eight gallons of sorghum from it. As it cooks in deep stock pots outdoors over propane burners the foamy skin that rises to the top is skimmed off. The boiling process will take several hours, and sometimes when larger amounts are being cooked down a shallow evaporator pan is used to speed it up, she said.

The temperature needs to get to about 230 degrees, so it's pretty much kept at the boiling point. When finished, it will be the color of a dark honey and about the same consistency. It is sometimes referred to as sorghum molasses, and used much the same as molasses or honey as a sweetener in drinks or baked goods.

The path to the finished project began back in April. It was planted in May, weeded and thinned in and it was harvested in mid-August, about two weeks before it was put through the press. The type of sorghum is the sugar-drip variety, LaMair explained, hardy and drought tolerant. Throughout the growing process the group met once a month.

The project was supported by a \$5,163 grant from the North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (NCR-SARE). It is titled "Connecting Youth to Tradition, Land, and Food Sovereignty through Cooperative Sorghum Syrup Production."

It is the third youth educator grant LaMair has applied for and been awarded. The first was a "One Garden" Americorps Vista Volunteer project that started a school garden at Lutie School, and the second also involved Lutie students, who took a field trip to Alford Forest near Brixey to study sustainable forestry.

As part of the syrup production grant, Flotsam Farm involved about 20 children as part of the Ozarks Wildskool, a homeschooling



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