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'Liquid gold' from walnut trees brings new attention to Highland County

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MCDOWELL — Christoph Herby stands inside his 96-square-foot sugar shed and watches the sap hauled from his black walnut trees boil. Steam rises from the evaporator and the air smells of buttered popcorn.

“That’s our liquid gold,” he says, noting the intense labor that goes into making walnut syrup.

Tonoloway Farm, a first-generation syrup operation run by Christoph and Lauren Herby in Highland County, is believed to be the only commercial producer of walnut syrup in Virginia.

But that could change. Researchers in Virginia and West Virginia hope to expand the industry, making the states leaders in the lesser-known but highly sought-after walnut syrup.

Highland County is well-known for its maple syrup. Its annual maple festival — initially scheduled for this month, but postponed amid concerns about the novel coronavirus — draws thousands to the sugar camps that dot the bucolic landscape.

Like maple syrup, walnut syrup is made by tapping trees for sap and boiling it. But walnut syrup is more difficult to make. Sap from black walnut trees contains pectin, a gelatinous substance used for setting jams and jellies, which complicates the filtering process.

Additionally, Herby said the sap yield is significantly lower in the black walnut trees on their property, a trickle compared to sugar maple trees.

The couple tapped both types of trees this year — 640 maples and 420 walnuts. Herby said they expect to produce more than 100 gallons of maple syrup compared to 10 gallons of walnut syrup. That's more than it sounds like, he noted, since few people purchase syrup by the gallon.

It's a significant increase from the year before, which was the Herbys' first producing syrup. The couple produced a very small amount of walnut syrup — really just enough for one pancake breakfast, Herby said — to see if it was possible. After determining it was, they decided to scale up for year two.

“This year is kind of our proof-of-concept year,” Herby said.

Tonoloway Farm sells not only maple and walnut syrups, but also a blend of the two, which has a complex, nutty flavor.

“It’s a taste of Appalachian hardwoods — not just maple, not just walnut, but it’s kind of this local blend of what our trees are producing,” he said.

When the Herbys first decided to make syrup and began walking their land in search of sugar maple trees, they found tons of black walnut trees, he said.

Typically, Herby said, walnut trees dot the forest. That so many walnut trees are concentrated in one place makes the couple’s farm unique. There are hundreds of walnut trees on their land that could be tapped.

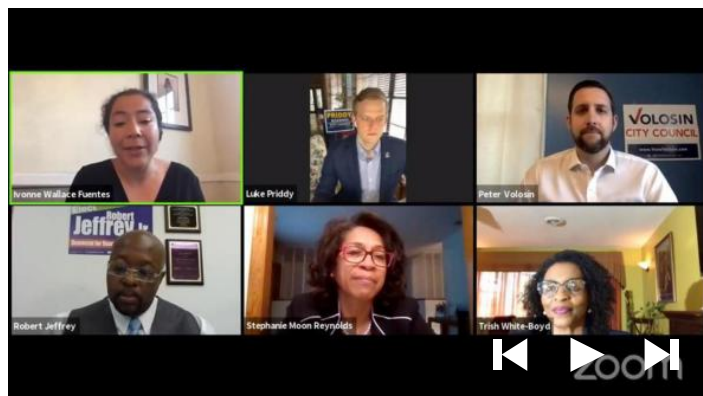
It turned out Tonoloway Farm is better suited for a walnut syrup operation than maple syrup.

“You live somewhere and it takes time to learn what the land wants to do,” Herby said. “And in our case this land is very well-suited to walnut syrup.”

The Herbys see potential for the walnut syrup industry to grow in Virginia. It’s unlikely that theirs is the only farm on which black walnut trees are plentiful — though they might be the only ones with the “wild ambition” to make syrup from them.

Mike Rechlin, maple commodity specialist for Future Generations University in West Virginia, likes to refer to walnut syrup as an “untapped resource.”

There's still much to learn about walnut syrup and the most efficient ways to produce it, but he believes it could be a boon for farmers.



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“I will say that Virginia and West Virginia could be the Vermont of walnut syrup,” Rechlin said.

People who have made maple syrup all their life will confess that walnut syrup is better, he said. Many producers have told Rechlin so.

But very little is produced currently, making it a high-value product. Rechlin said that online, walnut syrup can go for \$400 to \$500 a gallon, though few customers, if any, would buy that quantity.

It's something southern syrup producers could capitalize on.

“We have quite a walnut resource down here, a resource that they don't have up in New England, which dominates the maple business,” he said.

In addition to traditional uses — though it's a little pricey to regularly use it on pancakes — Rechlin said walnut syrup is being used in cocktails and specialty high-end food products.

Rechlin is researching ways to increase walnut sap production to make it more economically viable. He's also looking to make it easier to produce, like finding a work-around for the pectin problem.

A grant from Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education is supporting Rechlin's research into walnut syrup. He worked with the Herbys and another producer in West Virginia this season.

Similar efforts are underway at Virginia Tech, where Tom Hammett, a professor in the department of sustainable biomaterials, manages a tree sap program funded by the state and federal agriculture departments.

Hammett and Rechlin often work together, though the two have separate projects. Whereas Rechlin's work is centered specifically around walnut syrup, Hammett looks at tree sap generally, making black walnut trees one facet of his research.

“We're basically looking at expanding livelihood options for Virginia landowners through tree syrup production,” he said. “Black walnut is a key part of our program.”

Hammett said his work involves collaborating with and mentoring existing producers and looking at new markets and products to increase their competitiveness. Black walnut trees have

been tapped at Virginia Tech's Catawba Sustainability Center as part of his work, along with trees in several other counties in the region.

Additionally, Hammett is mentoring a Glenvar High School teacher and his ecology students.

Hammett said walnut syrup provides an opportunity for off-season income for farmers who primarily grow other products — say, soybeans. And for those already producing syrup, adding another species of tree could extend the tapping season and add income.

If landowners associate a value with the black walnut, Hammett said, they'll be more likely to carefully manage the trees and their surrounding forest.

Black walnut trees are more widespread than maple trees and can thrive in many different environments, he said, while maple trees tend to be concentrated at higher elevations. That doesn't necessarily mean there are more black walnut trees, just that they're present on more properties.

During a recent visit to a general store along the Blue Ridge Parkway, Hammett noticed a black walnut flavoring for sale. But it was artificial. If they wanted the real stuff, he said, that might present a "value-added" opportunity for syrup producers. Hammett just may give the store a call.



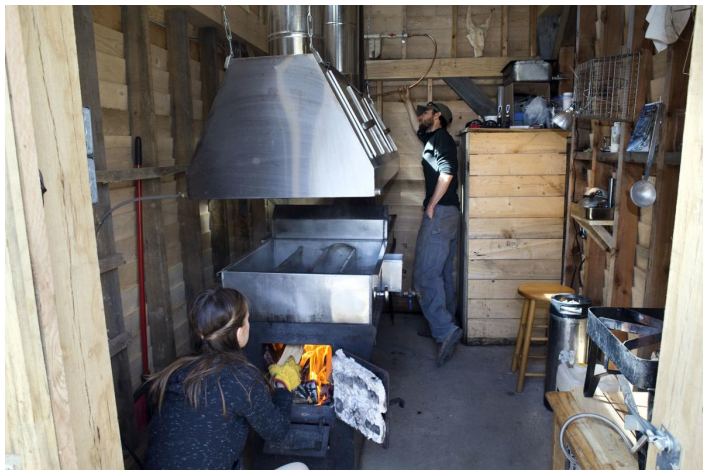
Tonoloway Farm makes pure walnut syrup and maple syrup, as well as a blend of the two. Walnut syrup is more difficult to make because the sap contains a gelatinous substance called pectin.

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Tubes carrying sap travel between the black walnut trees on Tonoloway Farm in Highland County. Lauren and Christoph Herby tapped 420 black walnut trees this season.

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Lauren and Christoph Herby work in the sugar shed they built on their land to make walnut syrup. The evaporator used to boil the sap takes up much of the space in the 96-square-foot structure.

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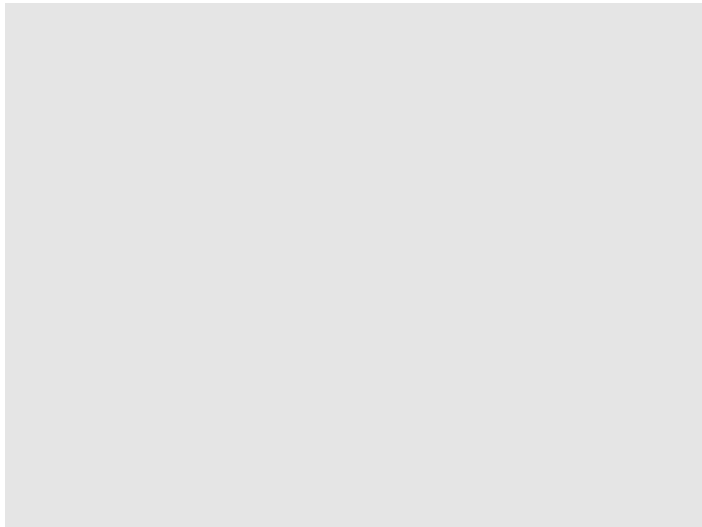
Lauren Herby gathers wood outside the sugar shed to boil the walnut sap. Herby and her husband pride themselves on sustainable living. Any wood used to fire up the evaporator comes from felled trees on their land.

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Teresa and Blaine Fitzgerald sample a walnut maple syrup blend produced by Tonoloway Farm in Highland County. Blaine Fitzgerald wanted to put the syrup on his ice cream.

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Sap collected from black walnut trees on Tonoloway Farm is boiled in the sugar shed on the Highland County property.

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Lauren and Christoph Herby make walnut syrup at their farm in McDowell. The couple stand in front of the sugar shed they built next to their home. They pride themselves on sustainable living. Any wood used to fire the the evaporator, where the sap is boiled, comes from felled trees on their land.

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Squash sits on the front porch at Tonoloway Farm in Highland County. Christoph and Lauren Herby utilize sustainable living practices.

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Lauren and Christoph Herby make walnut syrup at their farm in McDowell. The couple prides themselves on sustainable living. Any wood used to fire the evaporator used to boil the sap comes from felled trees on their land.

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Chickens peck for food on Tonoloway Farm in Highland County. Christoph and Lauren Herby utilize sustainable living practices.

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Teresa and Blaine Fitzgerald (center) stop by Tonoloway Farm in search of the walnut syrup produced by Lauren (left) and Christoph Herby. Blaine Fitzgerald wanted to put the walnut syrup on his ice cream.

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Christoph Herby monitors the sap, which is continuously boiled until it becomes walnut syrup.

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Lauren and Christoph Herby walk through the forest on their property with their dog, Laika. Tubes that carry the sap from the black walnut trees can be seen at left.

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Signs painted by Lauren Herby for Tonoloway Farm in Highland County dry in the driveway.

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Tubes carrying sap encircle a black walnut tree on Tonoloway Farm in Highland County. Lauren and Christoph Herby tapped 420 black walnut trees this season.

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Christoph and Lauren Herby make walnut syrup at their farm in McDowell. In the background are plastic tubes that carry the sap from the trees.

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More Information

Tonoloway Farm welcomes drop-in visitors.

9943 Highland Turnpike

McDowell, VA 24458

For more information and online ordering, visit
<https://tonolowayfarm.com/>

Casey Fabris

Casey Fabris covers business for The Roanoke Times, where she has been a reporter since 2015. Previously, Casey covered Franklin County.

