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Kate Fotos demonstrates equipment used to process various types of tree sap including birch, sycamore and walnut.

Alternative types of tree syrup explored

By Shawn Stinson

FRANKLIN – People will stop at the old McCoy Mill and Sweetwater Farm and inquire why there are sap lines attached to trees that aren't maple.

Kate Fotos and Mike Rechlin are happy to talk to them and tell them why those lines are on birch, sycamore and walnut trees. The pair is looking for alternatives to maple syrup.

"They know they're sap lines for collecting sap from trees, but they say, 'They're on the wrong trees,'" Rechlin said.

Fotos and Rechlin started the project through Future Generations University with a \$40,000 grant from the West Virginia Department of Agriculture. They hope to finish their initial work with a final report in the next few months.

"We have enjoyed our working relationship with Mr. Rechlin and his partners to support maple and other tree sap production outreach and research," Joseph Hatton, WVDA deputy commissioner, said in an email. "... We look forward to working with Mr. Rechlin and other partners to continue the education, research and demonstration of tree sap collection, production and processing.

"Sap production is a growing area of agriculture – connecting traditional production with the consumer through agro-tourism. Maple Days has been a huge success with many of our neighbors visiting the farm to see and understand the syrup production process."

The study kicked off by tapping several sycamore trees followed by approximately 100 walnut trees. The plan is to tap nearly 200 birch trees as well.

"We wanted to look at three different alternative saps from the West Virginia perspective," Rechlin said. "We wanted to see when was the sap running, how much it was going to give and was it worth it?"

Fotos added sycamore and walnut trees have been reportedly tapped in this area for years. She said people have said walnut syrup "tasted incredibly good" and sycamore syrup "tasted like butterscotch." Birch trees haven't been widely tapped in this region. Fotos said Alaskans and people in northern Europe have produced birch syrup for years.

One of the first difficulties Fotos and Rechlin experienced was these three types of trees couldn't be tapped like maples. Rechlin said they were forced to look to the past to fix some issues.

"We set it all up and all the trees leaked," Rechlin said. "The sap was running on the ground, this was not good. Walnut and sycamore are softer woods. The problem was the density of the wood."

To correct the issue, they needed a different spile for the sycamore and walnut trees than the typical

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ones on the market for maple trees. Rechlin said they "had to go back to an older-style spile for those trees." He was able to find the spiles and install them in the trees.

Once the tapping issue was resolved, Fotos and Rechlin could focus on getting the sap out of the trees. But that raised more questions than answers. There were several trees that produced a good amount of sap, while others failed to produce the same amount.

"We're trying to figure out why there are differences," Rechlin said.

Fotos believes the project's research will provide those answers and will assist others who want to try their luck making their own syrup. She added they are still gathering information on how to tap the trees, the output of sap a tree is expected to provide, the proper way to evaporate the sap as well as how to market the syrups.

"We want to take what we learn this year and apply it next year to get even more concrete data and make it as efficient and productive as possible," Fotos said.

Fotos and Rechlin with the backing of Future Generations aren't the only people in the state working on finding an alternative to maple syrup. West Virginia University is also running a parallel study. Rechlin said Mark Lambert, of Charleston, took samples to Tamarack.

"They said how much do you have because we will buy everything you got," Rechlin said of the retailer off of I-64 in Beckley.

The U.S. produced more than 4.1 million gallons of maple syrup in 2018, according to the United States Department of Agriculture. Vermont was the top producing state, yielding nearly 2 million gallons of maple syrup. New York was second with more than 800,000 gallons of maple syrup, followed by Maine with slightly less than 550,000 gallons. West Virginia was 13th on the list, producing approximately 8,000 gallons.

The website Alaska Wild Harvest estimates worldwide production of birch syrup is less than 5,000 gallons a year. The USDA has not gathered information on the amount of birch, sycamore or walnut syrup produced in the U.S.

"We are never going to out-compete Vermont for maple, but Vermont doesn't have any

walnut or sycamore," Rechlin said. "Maybe we could have a competitive advantage on some of these alternative species in the central Appalachian region."

At this time and with the data she and Rechlin have gathered, it appears walnut could be "the best possible alternative" to maple. However, she stressed birch and sycamore are also viable options as well. She added they are still gathering information on birch because its sap season starts near the end of maple's.

"With the data we currently have in and with the current flavor profiles, sycamore and walnut are much more like pancake syrups," Fotos said. "Birch is much more of a cooking syrup. If you poured it on your pancakes, you would be very surprised. It's more like in the sorghum, molasses realm."

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