Tapping into Sappy Non-Timber Forest Products for Fun and Profit

Photo by: George V. Cooke, Freelance Photographer

I imagine that one thing National Woodlands magazine readers have in common is that many of you own woodlands. And, I imagine that most of the members of the National Woodlands Owners Association subscribe to a management philosophy designed to "… ensure a sustainable managed forest resource in the United States." If either of these apply to you, keep reading this article.

Growing trees is a long-term endeavor. As woodland owners and foresters we are a patient lot. There are times, however, when we might wish we could squeeze a little income out of those trees on their way to the large sawlog class. There are also more than pecuniary reasons we might own and manage woodlands, and that's where the fun comes in along with the profit. What I am proposing in this article is that woodland owners consider sap and syrup production as a way to increase the financial benefits derived from their forest resource by tapping their trees, and increase the fun in owning a woodlot with a good "sugarin of" party.

Sap to syrup; maple of course. Everyone knows that maple syrup, or more precisely maple sap used to make syrup, comes from maple trees. Globally, maple syrup is a 1.24 billion dollar industry. In the United States there are estimated to be more that 9,000 maple farms, and all of them, quite naturally, have a woodlot. What is less known is that the classic sugaring tree, the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), is only one species within the Acer genus that can be tapped. Maple syrup is also made from red maple (*Acer rubrum*), silver maple (*Acer saccharinum*), black maple (*Acer nigrum*), and Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*). There is also growing interest in tapping box elder (*Acer negundo*), our compound leafed maple tree also called Manitoba maple. Taken together, that expands the industry potential well past its traditional New England roots. And recent research conducted through the USDA Acer Access and Development Program (Acer) shows a potential for syrup production from bigleaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*), adding the Pacific Northwest to the regions where consumers could "buy local" to supply their syrup needs.

Woodland owners have many avenues for adding sap and syrup production to their management planning. In addition to investing in the processing equipment to go in the maple syrup business they can rent trees to a nearby maple syrup producer to tap, or harvest and sell sap to a nearby producer. There are also ample resources available to any woodlot owner considering sap or syrup production. The science behind the sweetness is available at the North American Maple Syrup Council's site maplereseach.org. Both The University of Vermont's Proctor Maple Research Center (https://tinyurl.com/fp4fjs8s) and the Cornell University Maple Program (blogs.cornell.edu/cornellmaple/) have how to videos and extension materials.

Sap to Syrup; why stop with maple? So, you own a woodlot without a lot of maple? Not to despair. There are other species out there. There is a long history in the Scandinavian countries, Siberia and in Alaska of tapping birch. White birch (*Betula papyr-*