

NEWS RELEASE

Old Loon Farm

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A beautiful day filled with the buzzing of busy volunteers and visiting bees set the scene for the first annual Sorghum Fall Festival at scenic Merry Lea Environmental Center of Goshen College, located near Wolf Lake, Indiana. Loyal fans of this traditional syrup as well as interested novices looked on as many hundreds of pounds of sorghum cane were pressed, producing gallons of juice which was then evaporated and finished into golden, delicious and natural sweet sorghum syrup.

Siblings Don and Betsy Garber read about the event in the local news and were interested in the process. “We come from a lot of Amish and we were both born here and this is like our roots,” explained Betsy. “... and we’re nerds!”

A new product to some, sorghum syrup has a history in the Midwest and South as rich as its flavor.

“Our grandparents and folks living in the southern US states are likely more familiar with sorghum syrup than most people living in northern Indiana,” explained Jane Loomis of Old Loon Farm. “You may see sorghum syrup (often mislabeled as “sorghum molasses”) in country stores, but sorghum cane syrup is no longer in regular use as a sweetener in most of our area.”

The Festival was part of a revitalization of this time-tested sweetener spearheaded by Old Loon Farm, in partnership with Wise Farms LLC, Palmer Farms, and the sustainable farm at the Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College (Merry Lea).

Reminiscent of a slower-paced era, syrup-making takes hours to get from stalks and into jars. Farmers and volunteers from the producing farms collaborated to help press the cane and monitor the boiling juice.

As the stalks are hand delivered through a 120-year-old press powered by an equally antique-looking tractor, they yield a light-green juice that is strained and collected into 5-gallon buckets. The juice is then boiled in large evaporating pans over a wood burning stove. Finally, the thickened liquid is finished by boiling to 235° into a thick syrup that is delicious, nutritious and shelf-stable.

The goal of this project is to reintroduce this nutrient-rich, gluten-free, hyper-local, sweet-tooth satiating treat to the area’s farmers markets, restaurants, craft brewers and distillers. Its complex flavor is unique, and adds a flavor boost to many foods and beverages, especially fall and winter comfort foods!

“We were awarded a SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) grant from the USDA to research the economic viability of small-plot sorghum syrup production in northern Indiana,” said Loomis. “It’s a two-year project that includes planting, tending, harvesting, processing and marketing sorghum syrup.”

Through 2018, the three small farms and the Merry Lea staff will work cooperatively to investigate the optimum scale for profitably growing, harvesting, pressing and processing sweet sorghum cane on small plots, and to develop new local and regional markets for sorghum syrup. They are looking for additional small farms to join in production for next season.

“Our last year’s product was smooth and delicious, a great addition to pumpkin pies, cookies and – beer!” remarked Loomis. “So this year we are hoping to move to a bigger, and more standardized production, and document our effort to share with other northern producers.”

For more information, contact Jane Loomis at oldloonfarm@gmail.com.



A small patch of sorghum cane awaits harvest on Merry Lea Farm. The USDA funded this project to research the economic viability of small-farm production in N Indiana.



The stalks are hand delivered through a 120-year-old press to begin the process. Pressed canes are fed to local animals, making it a zero-waste operation.



Sorghum juice is boiled down and strained atop a wood-fired evaporator to create a thickened, golden liquid before final finishing.



The juice is carefully strained numerous times to remove impurities and particles.



The cook-down process begins on the evaporator. Roughly 7 gallons of juice produce a gallon of syrup.



The evaporated juice is filtered, boiled to 235° to finish, and packed into pints and quarts for sale.