

The Maple Syrup Community Across Kentucky

by Billy Thomas

Trees connect us in so many ways. During the 2023 Kentucky Maple Day, this connection was made repeatedly across Kentucky. The 19 locations that opened their operations on the first Saturday in February experienced that connection between people and trees firsthand as nearly 2,000 visitors spread out across the state to sample and buy Kentucky maple syrup and related products. While visiting nearly every corner of the state, these Kentuckians were also able to learn about the process of making this unique, organic product right here in Kentucky. They were also able to learn a little about the growing Kentucky maple-syrup community.

Maple Syrup Demand and Production

Because demand for Kentucky maple syrup far exceeds supply, producers find it difficult to keep product on hand. This is a good and bad problem: It is good that maple syrup producers can sell all they produce, and it is bad because many Kentucky consumers are unable to get their hands on Kentucky maple syrup. This begs the question, "Why aren't there more maple-syrup producers in Kentucky?" The answer, as is often the case, is nuanced and complex. Some may not realize it can be

made here in Kentucky, some may not be interested in trying another pursuit, and others may simply not know how to get started. This year's shorter-than-usual maple-tapping season in Kentucky is also a reminder that maple-sap flow for maple-syrup production is weather and climate dependent. Maple-sap flow is dependent on freeze-thaw cycles, where temperatures dip below freezing overnight and then rise above freezing the following day creating the pressure differential for sap to flow. Because of a changing climate, it should be noted that sugar maple is expected to be less abundant in its southern range, which extends just down into Tennessee. On the other hand, red maple, which often has less sugar in its sap but is readily tapped, is already the most abundant tree in Kentucky and its abundance is expected to greatly increase in the future. To learn more about how climate change may impact maple-syrup production as well as potential adaptive measures, visit <https://www.fs.usda.gov/ccrc/topics/maple-syrup>.

A Community of Maple-syrup Producers, Supporters, and Consumers

Fortunately, for those who may be thinking about try-

Steam was billowing up in the air, and folks wanted to stop and see what was going on. What they found, in many hollers and nooks across Kentucky, was all manner of sugar houses boiling down maple sap to make pure Kentucky maple syrup. They found their fellow Kentuckians in the midst of simple operations as well as much more elaborate ones—some with specialized equipment and their own associated commercial kitchens. Regardless of the size of their operations, all these producers were devotedly producing a sweet treat with a long and interesting history that still unites us today.





ing to make their own maple syrup there is a wealth of information available online and a welcoming community of Kentucky maple-syrup producers and others who are trying to work together to advance maple-syrup production in Kentucky. By working together, the hope is producers will be able to learn from one another while saving everyone the frustration and costs of mistakes that could be avoided with the right knowledge at the right time. The rest of us should benefit by having greater access to Kentucky maple syrup. Beyond those who are producing maple syrup, the Kentucky maple-syrup community has many more current and potential members. Woodland owners, whether they are syrup producers or not, are also important members of the community because they own the land where maple trees grow. Many producers enter into agreements with neighbors and others to access maple trees they may not have on their own property. Maple-syrup consumers are a crucial part of this community because their demand for a local, organic, sweet treat is helping to fuel the expansion of maple-syrup production across the state. Forestry, natural resources, and agricultural organizations are also a critical part of the maple-syrup community. Organizations such as the Kentucky Maple Syrup Association, UK Department of Forestry and Natural Resources, Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development, Kentucky Division of Forestry, Kentucky Department of Agriculture, and the Kentucky Natural Resources Conservation Service are some of the key organizations working to support Kentucky maple-syrup production and the producers.



Check out the recent 2023 Kentucky Maple Day video that highlights just a few of the Kentucky maple-syrup producers who opened their operations for the occasion. See this video at <https://ky-maplesyrup.ca.uky.edu/ky-maple-day>

maple-syrup community leaned in and helped many of these expanding producers by sharing lessons learned with the hopes of helping them to avoid common issues that might impact efficiency and the final product. It is true we have much to learn about maple-syrup production in Kentucky. It is also true that by working and learning together we will have the best chance to have a vibrant maple-syrup community that in turn supports sustainable woodland management, community engagement/development, and ultimately greater access to some of that sweet, pure, organic Kentucky maple syrup. A good place to start is to visit the Kentucky Maple Syrup Project at <https://ky-maplesyrup.ca.uky.edu>.



Maple sap is collected by inserting a tap into maple trees then using tubes, buckets or bag to collect the sap before boiling it down to syrup.



A maple syrup producer in northern Kentucky explaining the process of converting maple sap into maple syrup.

Getting Involved in the Maple-syrup Community

There is a growing Kentucky maple-syrup community and numerous opportunities for you to get involved as a producer, consumer, supporter, or all three. Many of the maple-syrup producers in Kentucky started out tapping a few trees in their yards before getting bit by the "maple bug," causing many to want to increase production. The

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