

Kentucky Champion Tree Program: The Sweet Splendor of Sugar Maple

by Diana Olszowy

The Kentucky champion sugar maple is located in Daviess County.

Photos courtesy: Diana Olszowy

Sugar maple is one of those multi-talented species that has significant value for several different reasons. First, it has become a very popular landscape tree due to its growth habit, shading ability and outstanding fall color, which, by the way, is like none other. Second, its wood is considered to be one of the most dense and hard of all tree species. Third, sugar maple is important for its role in the production of maple syrup.

Sugar maple has an extensive range, from Ontario and Manitoba, Canada, east to the New England states, west to Minnesota and Missouri and south to Georgia and Alabama. It grows best in well-drained, moist soils that have no threat of compaction, salt or restricted root zones. Kentucky's current champion sugar maple is a magnificent specimen measuring more than 16 feet in circumference and nearly 90 feet in height. The crown spread of this Daviess County champ is nearly 95 feet, which is unusual for the species since the normal crown spread averages two thirds of the tree's height. Sugar maples are a very long-lived species, capable of reaching 500 years of age.

The wood of sugar maple is heavy, light brown, and close-grained. It is called "hard maple" by the lumber industry and is a popular wood for furniture, cabinets, flooring, bowling pins and lanes. Of particular value is maple wood with abnormal grain patterns called "curly maple" and "bird's eye maple;" which are used to make gun stocks and musical in-

The bark of sugar maple is light gray to gray-brown and with age becomes deeply furrowed and rough.

struments, as well as other specialty products.

Maple syrup is considered one of the oldest naturally made products in North America, beginning when American Indians discovered this sweet product hundreds of years ago. The sap from sugar maple is collected from the trees early in the spring; and the best maple syrup season is from mid-February through early April, depending on the weather. Spring is the best time for production because at this time the tree has high sugar content and sap flow; therefore the most sap can be collected. And it requires a lot of maple sap to make maple syrup. It has been estimated that it takes approximately 40 gallons of sap to produce just one gallon of syrup.

In a forested situation, sugar maples are shade-tolerant and can persist in the understory for a long period of time waiting for a disturbance opportunity. They produce copious amount of helicopter seeds (called samaras), which drop in the fall and can germinate as quickly as the following spring. Fall coloration varies from green to brilliant yellow, orange and red, and the color's intensity is influenced by the shorter days and cooler temperatures. Sugar maples are indeed a sweet and magnificent addition to Kentucky's landscape.

About the Author: _____

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