



# Kentucky Maple Syrup Project

*by Billy Thomas and Jacob Muller*



**C**an you make pure maple syrup in Kentucky? The answer is a resounding “Yes, you can!” In fact, there are a growing number of Kentucky woodland owners who are doing just that, and they recently wrapped up another season of maple tapping, boiling, and bottling. While maple syrup may be experiencing a resurgence in Kentucky, it is not a new activity. The resourcefulness of Kentuckians and an abundance of maple trees have facilitated maple syrup production for a long time at varying levels of intensity. In the past, when sugar was rationed and hard to come by, many Kentuckians filled that sweet void with pure Kentucky maple syrup. Now, with a budding demand for local foods and regional sustainability, the interest in Kentucky maple syrup is growing as fast as ever, as evidenced by the formation of the Kentucky Maple Syrup Association in 2017.

People often think of maple syrup as being a Canadian and New England-based product. Canada does produce more than 70 percent of the world’s supply of maple syrup, while Vermont claims more than one-third of all maple taps in the United States. Despite heavy production in the New England states, the United States still imports more maple syrup than it produces (Figure 1). Maple syrup is produced in a

Year	Production	Imports	Exports
1,000 U.S. gallons			
1997	1,298	3,651	655
2007	1,517	6,164	550
2017	4,385	5,720	1,046
2019	4,372	6,429	1,051

Figure 1. U.S. Maple Syrup Production 1997-2019.

variety of ways using special equipment, ranging from very simple to very complex. However, all techniques involve collecting maple sap from maple trees, evaporating off the excess water in the sap, and bottling or canning the finished product while adhering to strict food-grade standards.

Demand for maple syrup is high and growing, and the University of Kentucky Department of Forestry and Natural Resources has been receiving an increasing number of requests for maple syrup information and support from county extension agents, the Kentucky Natural Resources Conservation Service, maple syrup producers, and the Kentucky Maple Syrup Association. How does Kentucky currently fit into the maple syrup industry, and what is our potential? Can maple

syrup get woodland owners more engaged with their woodlands and support many other benefits associated with a well-managed woodland? What risks does climate change present to the maple syrup industry? These questions, along with educational requests about the abundant maple resources in Kentucky (Figure 2), prompted the UK Department of Forestry and Natural Resources to engage with key partners and seek funding to support the development of the Kentucky Maple Syrup Project.

The Kentucky Maple Syrup Project (<https://ky-maplesyrup.ca.uky.edu>) has numerous ongoing activities and a growing library of maple syrup-related information, including videos and recorded programs. In addition to maple syrup workshops, a major educational offering is the Kentucky Maple School, which typically takes place in November and features maple syrup experts as well as maple syrup supply vendors. The project is also working with new and current maple syrup producers on a community science project to help researchers better understand the maple resources in Kentucky. The data collected from this project, as well as field research on maple sap production in Kentucky, are filling an important knowledge gap, as nearly all the maple syrup research is conducted in the northern United States and Canada. To engage Kentucky youth, a Kentucky 4-H Maple Syrup Project youth curriculum has also been developed and is currently being piloted. If you want to stay in the loop on Kentucky maple syrup, make sure to check out the website and subscribe to the Kentucky Maple Syrup Project electronic newsletter by visiting <https://ky-maplesyrup.ca.uky.edu/resources>.

The maple syrup season happens during one of the slowest periods from an agriculture perspective—the middle of winter; this can make it an attractive enterprise for farmers and woodland owners who may have a little more time and flexibility on their hands.





Modern maple syrup production utilizes new technology including tubing (above), modern evaporators, and reverse osmosis systems that can greatly increase output and save significant time.

Once you start boiling, it won't take long for folks to start showing up to see what you are up to and lining up to sample (and maybe even buy) your product! If you are a producer who has made some great maple syrup, you have a chance to enter the Kentucky State Fair (<https://kystatefair.org/contact-us/>) to compete for a blue ribbon and bragging rights.

If you want to get your hands on some pure Kentucky maple syrup, you had better move quickly, because Kentucky producers typically sell their syrup, along with other maple goodies, as quickly as they can produce it. You might get lucky and find some at a farmers market or roadside stand. If you are not so lucky, then go ahead and mark the first Saturday in February on your calendar for the 2023 Kentucky Maple Day. The Kentucky Maple Day is an annual celebration of Kentucky maple syrup and the Kentucky sugar makers

who are producing it, and for now, it is your best chance to try some pure Kentucky maple syrup. If you think you would like to try making maple syrup on your own, you will find like-minded individuals and a community of support within the Kentucky Maple Syrup Project; please join us on this sweet journey!

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- Economic Analysis of Maple Syrup Production Potential in Kentucky. USDA Kentucky NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant.
- Informing Management Practice Through Understanding the Effects of Species and Tree Characteristics on Maple Sap Volume and Sugar Content. USDA Kentucky NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant.

## Maple Resources in Kentucky

- **Sugar Maple:** 33,868,868 (at least 11"); 706,617,127 total
- **Red Maple:** 29,768,904 (at least 11"); 891,300,006 total
- **Boxelder:** 3,620,991 (at least 11"); 79,567,785 total



Figure 2. Kentucky has an abundance of maple trees. Many people do not realize that boxelder is a type of maple trees. Maples that can be tapped for maple syrup are one of the few tree species in Kentucky that have an opposite branching pattern.

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