

Press Room

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Maple syrup makers once again collecting tree sap as temperatures nudge up in northern states*Associated Press*

By Michael Hill

On a recent warm, rainy day, tree sap trickled through hundreds of taps and down through miles of plastic tubing to Larry Benson's sugar shack.

It was official: Maple season has started again.

Benson, among hundreds of maple syrup makers busy checking lines and stoking fires as temperatures nudge up in northern states, boiled down the clear liquid into warm syrup amid clouds of maple-scented steam.

"It's like most any other type of farming," Benson said as he crunched through the snow in the sugar bush. "You can make a profit, but you have to work for it. I do it because I enjoy it. I have no other reason to be here."

More than a million gallons of syrup will likely be made this spring nationwide, much of it from small producers like Benson, a retired dairy farmer near the Massachusetts line who makes maple syrup as much for pleasure as profit.

Maple sap begins to flow when nights are cool and daytime temperatures creep toward the 40s. Maple makers must move fast to collect the sap and boil down 40 gallons for every gallon of syrup.

At Benson's Hand Hollow sugar shack, about a gallon of sap a minute was flowing. Benson kept feeding firewood into the evaporator and dipping a hydrometer into the warm syrup to check for quality.

Outside, Benson's friend, Gus Murray, patrolled the cat's cradle of plastic tubing strung among the trees in search of leaks.

"This came on in a hurry," said Murray, ready with a roll of tape to patch holes. "It went from nothing to 'Boom!' in no time."

There are miles of tubing here and sometimes fittings can loosen or a squirrel might nibble through. Murray had already helped Benson drill 800 holes in the trees and set taps a few weeks ago. Murray figures to get a few quarts for his work.

Sap runs a bit earlier for Hand Hollow since the south-facing sugar bush warms up sooner than others. But the scene will be played out all over the Northeast this month.



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Almost 7.3 million taps were sunk into trees by American syrup producers last winter more than three-quarters in New England and New York, according to federal agricultural statistics.

New York was No. 3 in maple production last year, behind Vermont and Maine. While larger producers might sink many thousands of taps, the market is full of farmers and other rural landowners who do it as a side business.

Benson got the bug decades ago when he was still a full-time dairy farmer. He started with a stovetop pan on his farm and now teams up with neighbor Christine Dreyfus to tap more than 10 acres of her land. She owns the sugar shack, a small building with a slate roof that puffs out big clouds of steam when the evaporator inside is fired up.

They share the output. Dreyfus will sell some from the shack and both give away bottles to friends.

Benson has hopes to produce 150 gallons of syrup this month before buds on the trees signal the running of darker, less desirable, sap.

"Anyone who spends \$40 for a gallon of syrup better appreciate it because there's probably \$42 dollars of work in it," he said.

Some maple producers worry that warmer winters could hurt their operations. Sap ran in New York in early January 2007 during an unseasonable warm spell. But other longtime producers, like Benson, say they start collecting at about the same time they always have, on average.

In fact, conditions were generally too cold for optimal sap flow in New England last winter, while it was too warm in other states like New York and Wisconsin, according to a report from the National Agricultural Statistics Service in New England. Nationwide production was off 13 percent last year.

On the Net: New York State Maple Producers Association:
<http://www.nysmaple.com>

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