

Room for Expansion in Island Maple Sector

In many parts of northeastern North America, late March and early April is the maple tapping season. Cool evenings and warm spring days trigger the onset of spring and maples respond by flushing sap up to their branches. As most people know, this sap contains sugars which people collect to make maple syrup and many other sweet products.

While all maples produce sugars, the sugar maple is widely regarded as the preferred species because it has the highest sugar to sap ratio. On average, a good quality sugar maple can produce 1 liter of syrup from every 40 litres of sap. Sap is also collected from other maple species, particularly red Maple, but they tend to have lower sugar content. While red maple sap requires more time and energy to process, given their frequency and size in eastern woodlands, many producers also tap this species.

Sugar maple also has several additional desirable characteristics for syrup producers. It can reach diameters of nearly a meter and heights approaching 25 meters. This means that a mature tree can produce huge volumes of sap from multiple taps year after year.

While maple syrup is a highly valued product, the Island currently produces less than 10% of its own annual consumption. There are many reasons for the lack of on-Island production, but there are also many opportunities to for land owners and entrepreneurs who are interested in developing this product on PEI.

One of the Island's primary problems is the small average size of most sugar maple stands and the lack of large mature trees. Sugar maple prefers rich, well-drained soils in upland areas such as those found in the Bonshaw, Souris and Caledonia hills. Flatter areas east of Summerside and west of Portage also have excellent Sugar Maple potential. However, hardwood forest lands in most areas of PEI face constant pressure for housing development, conversion to other uses, and harvest for firewood. This constant pressure means that as time passes, large stands are often fragmented into smaller and smaller units. These same activities tend to prevent the development of older trees, reducing the potential to produce commercial quantities of sap.

All of this means that it can take some time to develop an area for maple production. However, there are many factors which could also support the development of this unique Canadian product on PEI. For instance, PEI has excellent soils and a climate well suited to upland hardwoods such as sugar maple. Stand management techniques can be employed to change the composition of a suitable stand from a mixture of species to one with a higher maple concentration. In stands which contain mature sugar maple, selection harvest systems can encourage young maples to sprout and grow in the deep forest shade. Over time these young trees will start to dominate the site creating a stand better suited to maple syrup production.

Sugar maple wood is also prized for high-value products such as hardwood flooring, furniture, staircases and mouldings. This can provide the land owner with another source of income from trees harvested as part of the development of the stand. Unwanted species and older maples reaching the end of their productive life span can be harvested and used to fuel the evaporator which removes water from the sap and concentrates the sugars into useable maple products.

Many maple producers also build value by marketing many different aspects of forests. They know that people like to reconnect with forests, so walking and skiing trails, sleigh rides, and maple syrup meals and festivals can help to bring customers out to their forest to enjoy this wonderful and totally natural forest product. The Island also has room to expand maple-related businesses and the Forest Enhancement Program www.gov.pe.ca/forestry/fep can help interested land owners to identify sites and management options for maple stands. You can get more information on maple stand management and maple product ideas at <http://maple.infor.ca>