

The Nature Nut

with Nancy Melcher

Sounds of Spring

Long before the first robin flies back, before the ice has melted from the pond, while snow still covers the fields and it feels like winter will last too long, there's a sure-fire sign of spring. Head out to a woodlot and listen. If you've chosen the right place you'll hear a distinct "plink, plink, plink." It's not a leaky faucet! You're hearing drops of liquid falling into a metal pail, and it means the sap is flowing up the trunks of maple trees. THIS is the first sound of spring!

It's not known exactly who discovered that concentrating sap produced a sweet drink. Popular First Nations lore tells how maple sap was used instead of water to cook venison for a chief. Natives collected sap in bark containers. When it froze overnight, they would dispose of the ice layer that formed on top. This treatment of the sap increased the sugar content. Another method was to drop hot cooking stones into the containers.

There are several types of maple trees in eastern North America that produce a sweet sap, but the best for syrup production is the Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*). These trees can live well over a hundred years, and must be at least 30 cm across at eye level to be tapped. Only 10% of the sap is collected, so it doesn't harm the tree. A mature tree can have four taps, and give 180 litres of sap. However, all that sap makes just 4 1/2 litres of syrup (40 litres sap = 1 litre syrup). It's a lengthy process boiling the sugary sap to get rid of all that extra water.

European colonists learned how to collect sap from the First Nations people. In the 17th and 18th centuries sap was processed into syrup and sugar. Rather than chop into the trunk, the settlers instead bored a hole in the trunk with drills. They inserted hollow wooden spouts into the holes and hung a wooden bucket on the end of the spout to collect the sap. The buckets were emptied into barrels on long sledges pulled through the snowy bush by horses or cattle. The sap was transferred into heavy, round, iron kettles. The huge pots were suspended over a fire, either out in the open or in a shelter, the original "sugar shack".

Around the time of Confederation,

syrup producers began to use wide flat sheet-metal pans which were more efficient for boiling. Sugar shacks became small buildings to keep the pans covered. Early in the 1900's the bottoms of the pans were bent to make a series of channels, allowing for a greater surface area for boiling to occur. At the same time metal buckets replaced the wooden ones, and the animals were displaced by tractors.

Modern syrup production is very different. It's a big business now. Vacuum pumps draw the sap through plastic tubes directly to the evaporator house, where reverse-osmosis machines take out some of the water before it's boiled. Better storage containers keep the sap fresh, and pre-heaters recycle the heat lost in the steam.

Sap is like milk: it can spoil quickly. That affects the taste of the final product, so sap must be boiled the same day that it's collected. The quality of the syrup is also affected by when during the season the sap is collected, and how long the sap boils. While it tastes sweet, sap is just 2% sugar. It becomes syrup when the sugar content reaches 66.5%.

Light-coloured syrup is produced early in the season when the nights are crisp and cold, well before the leaf-buds begin to open. The colour darkens as the spring progresses and the trees begin to grow. Darker syrup has more maple flavour, and is preferred by most people. That's what is on grocery store shelves. Maple sugar can be made from any type of syrup, and requires additional cooking time to remove the remaining water. Eleven kilograms of syrup will produce eight kilograms of maple sugar.

Your Nature Nut has extra-long arms and a strong back from carrying pails of sap to the sugar shack at her in-laws' woodlot near Stirling - no horses, tractors or hoses for us. If you want to experience this annual rite of spring yourself, visit a local sugar bush. Plan a visit in March, then take part in the Sunderland Maple Syrup Festival April 6th and 7th. Siloam Orchards will not be open to the public this year, but Brooks Farms near Mt. Albert will be, and Purple Woods and Bruce's Mill are local Conservation Areas offering tours, pancake meals and more. There's nothing better than a walk in the woods and delicious maple treats afterwards!



Tiger Talk from page 8

Although she is still a couple of years away from her G1 test, Dakota is anxious to begin her life as a driver.

"It will be great to not have to walk home..." she sighs.

Eventually, after several months of practice, you'll be ready to take your G2 road test, which will permit you to drive by yourself. You may choose to take your test at any one of the driving test centers scattered across the GTA, the closest one being in Lindsay. On the day, you'll probably feel like you're ready to hurl, but from the voices of experienced students, the 20 minute test flies by. Be prepared to demonstrate all that you've learned in driver's ed in terms of your turning, parking and cognition of law. Be calm. Be cool. Be polite with the driving examiner. Try not to run over any grannies.

After successfully passing your G2, even if it takes you a few tries, you will emerge as a new member on the streets. With your G2 license, you are placed in a position of responsibility you have never been privileged with before. You'll feel powerful, excited, ready and at the same time, uncertain and a little hesitant.

A grade twelve student with two years of independent driving experience under her belt, Megan Harvey, elaborates, "When I first got my G2, I came home, and like

anyone I know I wanted to go driving. On my own, I'd go out and see what it was like. My parents didn't think that I should. So, I only drove two minutes down the road. I didn't go over 50km. By the time I got back to my driveway, I thought 'this isn't so bad'. Next time I got in the car, it was easy. I'd go faster. I wasn't afraid."

Until the time comes to try out for your full G license, you will have plenty of opportunity to refine your driving skills. The best advice for learner drivers?

"Listen to your parents," says Megan. "If you don't listen to them from the beginning, then you're not going to learn as much."

Bradley also puts in his two cents, "Chill out. Don't panic. Listen to your driving instructor. Look at it this way, he's the one with the extra brake pedal on his side."

While you are evolving the most in your years as a younger driver, you are always learning as a participant in driving. In the meantime, enjoy the ride.



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