



The sap gets boiled down in large vats.



Eldon Comfort stokes up his wood-burning boiler under the evaporator in his sugar hut.



Four-litre containers are filled from a holding tank which keeps the syrup hot after the evaporation process is complete.

This
week
thru
the
lens



Trees are tubed, not tapped, for easier collection on the Comfort homestead.

Story and photos
by Anne Redfearn

Maple sugar time is COMFORTing

At 7.30 a.m. Eldon Comfort is stoking up the fire under the boiler in his sugar shack. If the sap run is good today, he'll be boiling down maple syrup until late in the evening.

It's a spring ritual for the Comforts and for many others living along the edge of the maple forest south of Acton, many who are willing to keep an all-day, all-night vigil beside their cookers. Not the Comforts... at least, not all night.

"It's just a hobby," Comfort insists. "This isn't my bread and butter." But it tastes good with bread and butter, and even at \$25 to \$35 a gallon, there will always be a market for this sweet stuff.

Compared with some, the Comforts have a sophisticated set-up... a sugar hut, a large evaporator which feeds the raw sap through at a steady rate, a wood-fired boiler and a gas-powered finishing tank, and miles of plastic tubing joining a

modest sugar bush of about 600 productive trees.

Actually, the old boiler came out of the ruins of a building in the Guelph area, salvaged piece by piece by Comfort for his maple sugar shack years ago. The holding tank which keeps the syrup hot until it can be poured into tins is an old coffee urn. The equipment, however, serves its purpose.

This is the last year for syrup-making for Eldon Comfort. "It's a good hobby, but it's time-consuming. I think I'll give it up for other things after this year."

Sap is collected through tubes, pumped through to a warming tank where it is heated up, then drained into the evaporator. Once it reaches the correct temperature and consistency, it is transferred to a stainless steel finishing tank and heated to a temperature of about 218 degrees. When it reaches that temperature, or when the sugar content reaches 66 per cent, it's ready.

The syrup is strained through felt to get rid of the "sugar sand", a gritty, sugary substance which looks like dirt before it is poured into containers to be cooled.

The whole process can take just a few hours, or many, depending on how much sap is to be boiled down. Besides, so much water has to be evaporated from the sap that 40 gallons of the stuff boils down to only one gallon of syrup.

At the moment, Comfort is burning maple logs in the fire box under the sap boiler. "Last year I tested the sugar content of the sap from all my trees. The

ones with low sugar content (less than two per cent) got the axe."

Years ago, when Comfort, a retired school principal, first bought the property, he tapped 200 trees using the old-fashioned tin pail method. A few years ago, he switched to the tubing method. The sap is drawn from the trees by a vacuum pump and stored in a small holding tank until it's time to boil.

It doesn't last long, however. After just a couple of days, stored sap turns a milky color as the bacteria content rises, and it is no good for syrup.

Maple syrup producers generally follow the same guidelines when tapping trees: don't tap a tree until it has grown to 10 inches in diameter. For every four inches over the original 10 inches, another tap can be added. The holes drilled into the trees are 7/16 of an inch in diameter, about three inches deep. "People have been tapping trees for generations, and no harm has ever come to the trees."

Cold nights and warm, sunny days are needed to get the sap moving. But if the weather turns too warm, the buds appear in the trees, and the sap takes on an unusual flavor. "Most producers consider that to be the end of the run."

Also, the syrup gets darker as the spring advances, and lighter syrup is considered better quality, he added.

"It's too early to judge whether this is a good year for syrup," Comfort said. "At the rate it has been flowing, it could end tomorrow. Or it could continue for another few weeks."



Helpers Tony Fitzsimons of Georgetown and David Eaton of Acton sample the almost finished product.

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