

Conservation Corner

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As I write this week's column, the sun is shining, the snow is melting, and the temperature is rising. Are you coming down with spring fever, too? While the calendar says mid-February, trumpeter swans have already returned to Pocahontas County, Canada geese are honking their way north over Pocahontas County, and the sap is flowing in the maple trees of Pocahontas County.

Maple syrup, a uniquely American crop, is one of our oldest agriculture commodities. And while most maple syrup is harvested in Canada and the northeastern United States, Iowa also has a few commercial producers in its northeastern counties as well as a growing number of hobbyists statewide.

Making maple syrup is very labor intensive and requires some investment in equipment for tapping trees, collecting and reducing sap, and bottling syrup. The most important ingredient, of course, is a maple tree of at least 10 inches in diameter. Not all maples are created equal, however. The sap of hard maples (sugar and black varieties) has twice the sugar content of soft maples (silver and red varieties) and three times more than the lowly boxelder tree. An average sugar maple will average 20 gallons of sap and produce 1/2 gallon of syrup each year.

This year PCCB is offering two sugar maples on our Spring Tree Sale. The sugar maple, *Acer saccharum*, is native to eastern Iowa and prized for its dense shade and brilliant fall colors. Also on the sale is a newer cultivar, the Fall Fiesta® Sugar Maple, which also features good fall color along with rapid growth rate and disease resistance. Both will also provide tasty maple syrup, albeit for the next generation.

It's not just pancake eaters that enjoy maple syrup, though. Some wildlife also harvest tree sap as a welcomed energy source at the end of winter. The red squirrel is known for scoring the bark of sugar maples allowing the sap to drain and evaporate in the winter sunlight before licking the sugary residue. An Iroquois Indian myth tells how their people received the gift of maple syrup when a youth, after noticing a squirrel licking the sap, decided to try some, too.

I'll close with an Anishinabe legend as retold by Joseph Bruchac and Johnathan London in *Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back: A Native American Year of Moons*.

Long ago maple syrup dripped, thick from the trees. All year round, you just had to break a twig and lie down beneath the tree with open mouth.

But the people got lazy and when Our Creator, Git-chee Ma-ni-tou, sent his helper, Man-a-bo-zho, to visit, he found their village deserted and all the people asleep under the maple trees.

So he poured much water into all the maples so that now the people would have to wake up, make fires, and boil down the sap to make syrup. They would have to work hard, for that maple sap would flow just this one time of the year, the time we now call Maple Sugar Moon.

