

by Amy Nicholson

As I drive by the woods on my way to run errands, I steal a quick glance at the network of plastic tubing zigging and zagging like a spiderweb through the maple trees, a busy farmer's sugar bush. It is our neighbor who tends the sap lines now, but years ago, when we made our own maple syrup, we installed the tubing. It didn't begin so elaborately for us, though.

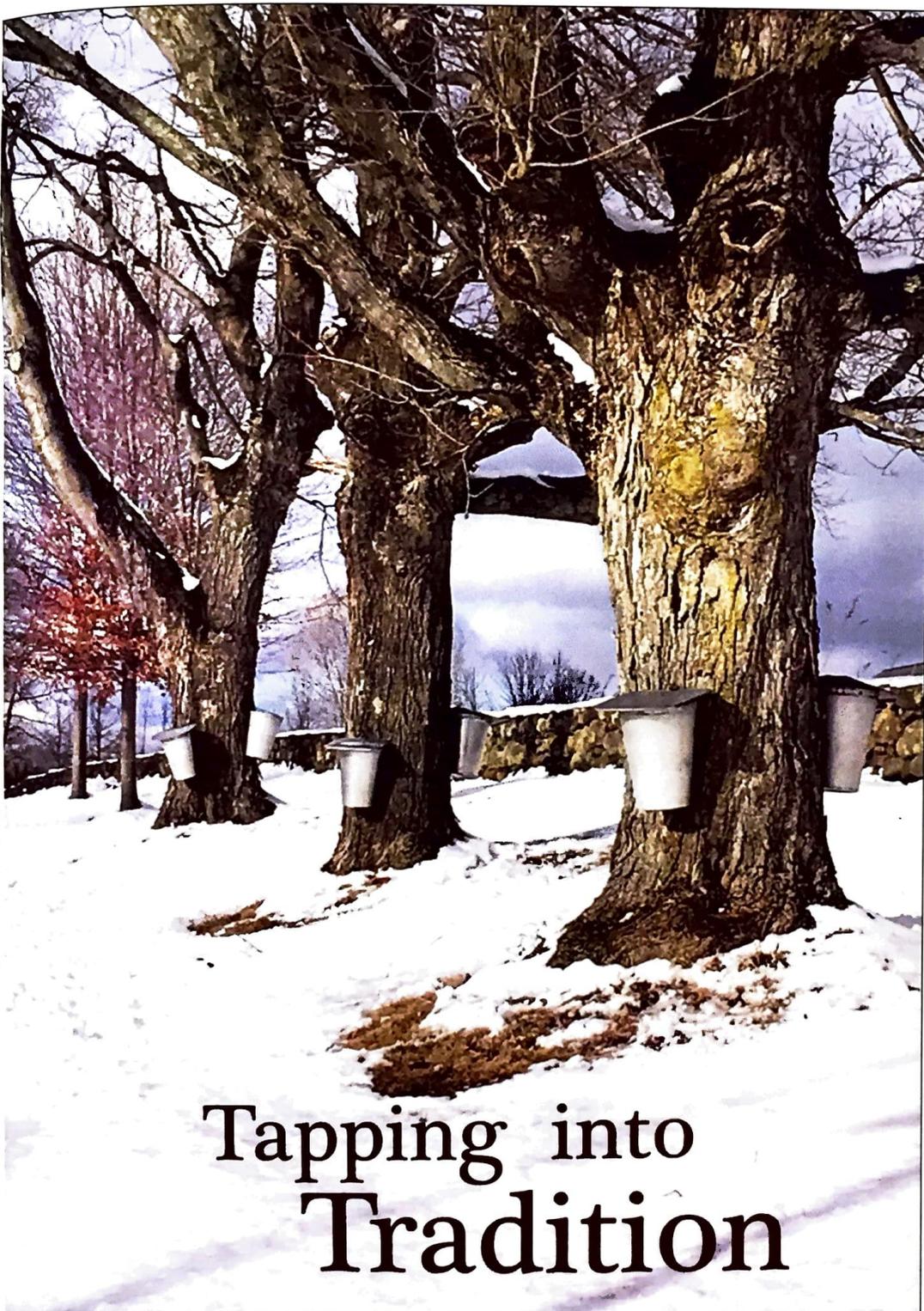
My husband DJ and I had always wanted to try our hand at this centuries old practice. Early settlers most likely learned it from Native Americans in the 1700s. Folks here in the Northeast have been making this sweet condiment ever since.

We are fortunate to live in an area suitable for making maple syrup. What is needed? Maple trees and the right climate. Warm days and cool nights. The climate in the northern states and provinces of North America and the East Coast (Quebec south through New England, New York and Pennsylvania, and west to Ohio) makes it the optimal region for production. For this reason, maple syrup is a traditional North American product.

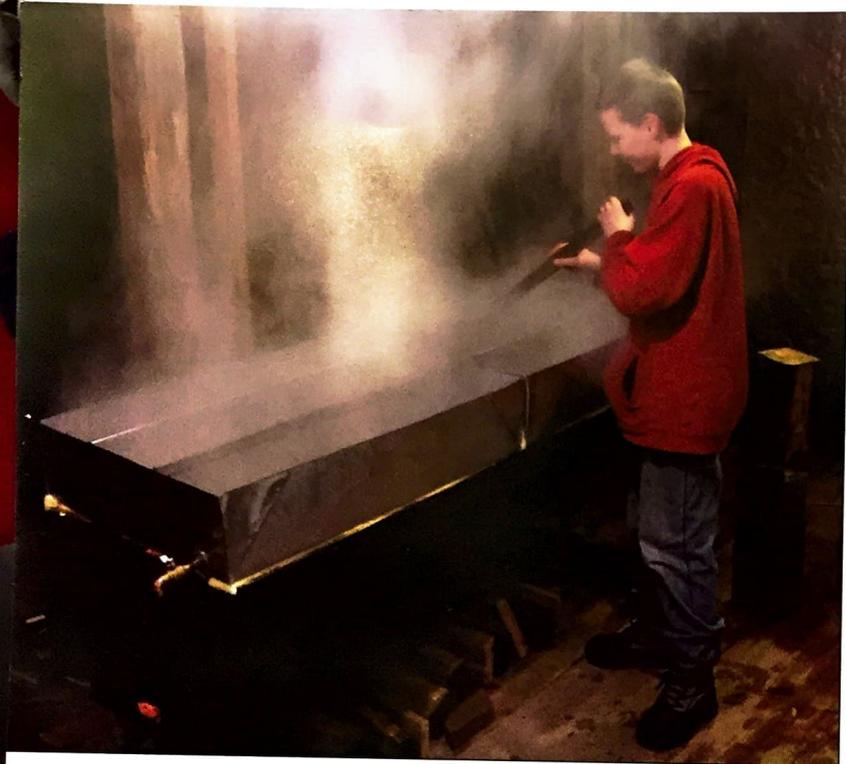
We figured since we live in the right

---

Trio of tapped maples  
*photo by Charlene Skarupa*



# Tapping into Tradition



Tim at 14 years old stirring sap in evaporator pans in the sugar shack he helped build.

*Photo by Amy Nicholson*

that ran from one tree to the next and downhill to collect in a 275-gallon tote. With the volume of sap we were collecting with so many taps, we needed to boil it in containers bigger than the pots we were using. We decided to commit to the endeavor and move the operation out of the kitchen.

DJ and our oldest son, Tim, built a sugar shack on the back of our house to accommodate our expansion. It was rustic, but it did the job. We used full-sized evaporator pans on a stove called an “arch,” a very long, heavy wood-burning combustion chamber. If you’ve never tried it, the process of making maple syrup from sap you collect yourself may seem idyllic, pastoral. If you have tried it, maybe you’d substitute the words frustrating, exhausting.

It’s a lot of work. Often you are collecting sap on cold days. It sloshes around in the buckets, occasionally splashing onto legs and feet. An unpleasant experience to be sure. One thing is true, it requires a great deal of patience. Sometimes we need to do new things just to learn virtues like patience.

It was a fitting time in the life of our family to make syrup. Tim was old enough to mind the boiling pans while he read his assignments, and I was in the house teaching the two younger kids.

Syrup production is slow work, and it requires constant attention. If the pans are left unattended, the sap could boil off and the extreme heat from

place and we have maples all around us, why not give it a try?

Since I was homeschooling, and the kids and I were home most of the time, it was the ideal season in our lives to give it a go. We started simple. We tapped only the maples in our yard and collected the sap in aluminum buckets we hung there. Old school. We boiled the sap in pots on the kitchen stove. With some success and much excitement, we expanded our operation. We wanted to make more syrup, so we had to collect more sap in the short time that is maple syrup season--about Valentine’s Day to St. Patrick’s Day--here in northwest Connecticut.

With our eye on the maples in the woods behind our yard, we inquired about renting taps from the state as the trees were on state property. They gave us permission, and, at twenty-five cents a tap, it seemed like a good deal.

DJ installed a system of plastic taps and tubing

the arch can burn up the pans. At the other extreme, if the fire is not fed wood when it starts to cool, the sap will stop boiling, and, if left long enough, go bad and all that work would have been for nothing.

All that patience paid off for Tim, though. As a teenager, he was able to not only see and participate in the process from start to finish, he was also able to sell his syrup at a local candy shop and turn a sweet little profit from his labor.

If you find yourself curious about the process and home a great deal during sugaring season, and you live in a region blessed with an abundance of maples, you may want to try it yourself. If you're starting small like we did and doing it the old-fashioned way, you drill a small hole in the maple tree, insert a tap, and hang a bucket from the tap.

The sap drips out or flows out depending on the weather. The sap runs best when nights are cool (below freezing) and days are very warm. The difference in temperature builds up pressure in the tree, forcing the sap out.

The sap looks like water and tastes only slightly sweet because it is mostly water. If you have a taste, and it doesn't taste like something you'd want to pour on your pancakes, do not be discouraged. It's only when most of the water is boiled off that the syrup as we know it emerges. Depending on the sugar content of the sap, it takes about

forty gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. As the sap boils, and the cotton candy scent fills the air, it can be quite a thrill, harkening back to simpler times.

It was exciting to try our hand at a tradition that has been alive for centuries. Although our family's season for making maple syrup ended after a couple years when we found we had less time at home, we are still surrounded by sugar farmers. Our neighbor up the road and my brother-in-law in town boil every year. They've both made small businesses out of selling maple syrup. Compared to our simple set-up, their operations are quite sophisticated. They even use reverse osmosis machines. This year, my brother-in-law made 110 gallons of syrup.

One thing is sure; simple or sophisticated, syrup-making can be a fulfilling pastime for young and old alike. ✧



---

The neighbor's spring sap lines  
*Photo by Amy Nicholson*