

Sweet Freedom and Unity

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Maple sugaring is one of Vermont's oldest and most revered institutions. Just the thought of it brings up wonderful visions of people working with the land, of steam pouring out of sugarhouses tucked away in the woods, and of golden syrup that is heavenly. Maple sugaring is as Vermont as it gets.

One of my favorite recollections of sugaring in Vermont is the tradition of annual maple meetings held in the cold days of January. Although each county's meeting had its own expression, they all had certain common elements. There was always education that generally included a bright researcher from the University describing the latest and the greatest. There were always equipment dealers showing off their new wares. And of course there was the meal of ham and turkey, gravy and potatoes, and a wide variety of maple desserts. All of this in a cozy setting!

One of the strengths – in fact the greatest one in my view! – was the producers themselves. They asked questions and freely shared information and techniques. Although there were many producers who contributed to the discussion, some could be relied upon to deliver real pearls of practice-based wisdom on thorny production issues. It could be how to make better use of an undersized sugarhouse, how to get the sap out, or how to take care of the health of the trees.

This part of the maple meetings left me with a profound respect for the ingenuity and craftiness of Vermont's maple producers. I suspect that many producers gravitate toward maple because it is a way to generate some revenue in the off-season. But I also think people love to sugar because it gives them an opportunity to express their unique relationship with a maple forest and a maple forest product that is their very own.

A publication was recently released by the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation that distills a lot of the information that has come out of these maple meetings over the years. It is a publication that is full of wisdom and, if followed, will likely result in a healthy sugarbush over time. In short, it is a superb guide particularly if producers are encouraged to select from it as they choose to inform their ways of sugaring.

The guide has now been adopted as a standard for Vermont's Use Value Assessment Program. Will this well-meaning step take the joy, freedom, and artistic expression out of sugaring in Vermont? I hope not.