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Families Get Tips On Tapping Sap For Syrup



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Photographer

Susan Buffalino gives a demonstration on how to tap a maple sugar tree at Rancocas Nature Center in Westampton on Sunday, Feb. 15, 2015.



WESTAMPTON — Maples are known for the gorgeous colors they bestow in fall, but only one kind of maple gives a sweet gift during the depth of winter.

That's the sugar maple, the source of the delicious syrup that goes so well with waffles. Families gathered at the Rancocas Valley Nature Center on Sunday to learn all about the tree and how to tap its sap for syrup.

“Every spring we schedule a maple sugaring program, and it's time to map the seasonal changes the sugar maple is going through,” said Susan Buffalino, sanctuary director. Buffalino taught the all-ages group about tree biology, including how trees help make air breathable because they absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen.

“One of the interesting things about a tree is that only one percent of the tree is actually alive, even during its growing season,” said Buffalino.

In warm months, leaves use photosynthesis to create sugar and send that sweet stuff down to the rest of the organism. When the temperature drops, the tree begins to store carbohydrates in the form of starch. Toward the end of winter, it turns the starch into sugar and sends it back up top to help branches sprout new leaves.

That transitional period in the season, when it's warm enough during the day for sap to flow up the tree but cold enough to freeze at night, is the perfect time to tap for sap.

“She broke down the (cycles) of the tree and what they do during each season, and that was pretty interesting to me. I used to sap as a child, but we never understood it to that

degree,” said Tony Boatwright, of Lumberton, who grew up in the Allegheny mountains of Pennsylvania.

Boatwright brought her 5-year-old daughter, Gabriella, and 9-year-old son, Russell, with her to the presentation. Gabriella said she didn’t know “that sap comes out the trees.” Maple sugaring is an old-fashioned process that hasn’t changed much since colonial times. Buffalino demonstrated how to drill a hole using a hand-cranked tool called an auger — she said she tried to use power tools once and it didn’t work nearly as well. A tap goes into the hole so that sap will drip out into the bucket below.

A maple sugarer is at the mercy of the day’s temperature. The group hiked out in the snow to see a tree that had been tapped, but it was too cold that day for the sap to flow, so they went back inside to enjoy some sap and waffles that had been prepared earlier. “Not very much flavor at all,” noted Pat Iannone, 74, of Westampton.

Patrick Hampson, 13, of Edgewater Park, said, “You don’t taste it for like a millisecond, but you start to get it after a few seconds.”

The sap is as clear as water and tastes only a bit sweet. It has to be boiled until it shrinks 40 times in volume before it turns into the familiar dark-brown syrup.

Another bottle held light-gold sap that had been boiled halfway into syrup. It already had a distinctly delicious maple flavor — straight from the tree.