

Wilderness Way Tips by Tamarack Song

Sweet Sensations

No, this isn't about *that* sensation--that would be another magazine. Here we're going to look at a primitive method for gathering maple sap. The Indians probably made very little maple syrup, because they had no easy way to store it, and it was a heavy commodity for nomadic people to cart around. Most sap was consumed just as it came from the tree, or it was made into sugar. The sap, having a mildly sweet flavor and high mineral content, was a welcome, nourishing treat after a long winter. In season, we drink it instead of water.

When daytime temperatures average 40°, with around 20° nights, the sap flows best. However, I have tapped trees in warmer weather and still got good sap. The main difference between early and late sap is that the later it is, the darker and stronger tasting it becomes. So even though your temperatures may be higher than the ideal, go tap a tree or two and see what you get.

There are three traditional ways to tap a tree:

- Gash the trunk
- Break off a branch
- Drill a hole in the trunk and insert a spile (a hollow tube)

I prefer the last method, as it causes the least damage to the tree. Here's how to go about it:

- 1. Choose a sugarbush.** Sap gets heavy fast, and you could be carrying a lot of it--a large tree can produce 40 gallons in a season--so it pays to tap easily-accessible trees. All species of maple, including box elder, produce good sap. However, if you don't have maple, all is not lost, as many other species also produce tasty sap.
- 2. Make spiles** of about a hand's length from hollow or pithy finger-diameter branches. We use sumac (*Rhus* species); check to see what is available in your locale, and make sure it is non-toxic.
- 3. Select good trees** -- healthy, with a minimum 8 inch diameter, in sunny locations.
- 4. Set taps.** Drill a hole into the sunny side of the trunk (where the sap flows best) as deep as the width of your thumb and sloping slightly downward, and insert a spile into the hole (see picture). Set one tap for each 8 inches of tree diameter. The holes will heal over in a year or two.
- 5. Hang containers under spiles.** Anything works: coffee cans, plastic milk cartons, etc. The picture shows a birchbark container that is traditionally used here in Lake Superior country.

A word of caution: the sap can go sour fast, so keep it refrigerated. Freeze or give away whatever you can't consume within a few days--unless, of course, you want to boil it down to maple syrup!