

Publications / Community Times

# The magic of maple



Naturalist intern Grace Abel of the Irvine Nature Center, Owings Mills, uses a brace-in-bit to drill a hole in a black walnut tree and collect sap for sugaring. Naturalist volunteers learned the art of sugaring which they will teach to young visitors at the center. (Phil Grout / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

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**S**top by Irvine Nature Center, in Owings Mills, on any given day during the year, and you're likely to find exotic animals both housed inside and roaming about outdoors. Much of the center's programming and outreach centers on such wildlife. But this month, the staff is turning its attention to a different part of its landscape: the trees.

February is Maple Sugaring Month at Irvine — a celebration of the process of creating maple sugar that has been a staple at the center since long before it moved to its new location on Garrison Forest Road in 2008.

"Maple sugaring's a really exciting time for me here," said Steve Mickletz, naturalist and manager of public programs at Irvine. "I really like it so I'm really excited that we do it."

The month features several opportunities for children and adults alike to learn about the process of making maple syrup.

Throughout February and into early March, the center holds field trips for students grades pre-K through college. During the outings, which are \$4 per student, children get to learn about the history behind maple sugaring, the process of turning sap into maple syrup, and the difference between the substance people typically buy in stores and what is extracted from maple trees.

"One of our main draws for the maple sugaring month is providing field trips for county schools, city schools and home schools ... the trips fit in really well with both science and history lessons," Mickletz said.

Moe Brown, a volunteer at Irvine, is one of the field trip instructors. He said he takes students through a program that begins with a look at how Native Americans made maple sugar and continues with how the process is done today, from selecting the right trees to isolating the sugar from the water in sap by putting it in an evaporator.

"And from there we show them how you would drill a hole in the tree and how deep," he said. "And they have the opportunity to taste the sweet water because less than 3 percent or less of the maple's sugar sap is actually sugar, the remainder is just water, and we take them to a place where the sap is being reduced to maple sugar, which means the 97 [percent water] and 3 percent [sugar] is being evaporated down to about a 66 percent water and 33 percent sugar, which is maple sugar."

Another popular part of Maple Sugaring Month is Maple Magic, a recurring program that takes families on a similar historical and scientific journey as the field trips.

"The Maple Magic walks we've been doing probably as long as the field trips and they are essentially the field trips put in a form that families can enjoy," Mickletz said. "We will visit our evaporator and we'll go through the history of making maple syrup and also get to taste it at the end."

Maple Magic events, which are suitable for all ages, take place from 1:30 to 3 p.m. on Feb. 27 and 28 and March 5.

"We do go on a bit of a hike to go through the process so as long as kids can handle the outdoors in February ... then they should be really enjoy the walk," Mickletz said.

Mickletz said parents normally "get as much out of it, if not more, than the kids.

"And I caution parents not to answer too many questions because usually the kids know the answers but the parents don't," he said with a laugh.

Maple Magic is free for members and \$10 per person for nonmembers, and interested individuals are encouraged to register early to ensure a spot.

"It's a really great way to get outside with your family with friends during the winter months. It can be so easy to just feel stuck indoors and forget about all the really amazing thing that are happening around us outside," Mickletz said.

If parents want a chance to get out by themselves, they can attend Sweet Trees and Tees, a 21-plus event from 6:30 to 9 p.m. Feb. 18. The evening features dinner catered by Baltimore-based Copper Kitchen, and a 45-minute lecture about maple syrup and where it comes from by nature center director of education, Rob Mardiney.

Mickletz said it will be "just a good time to be with some friends and other nature-lovers."

Attendance is \$30 for members and \$40 for nonmembers, with the proceeds of that and all other maple sugaring programs go toward the center and its educational outreach.

For members, the center has a special treat: Maple Sugar Pancake Breakfasts. The free breakfasts are held from 9 to 10 a.m. and from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. Feb 20. Members must register in advance to attend.

"The maple sugar pancake breakfast is an event for our members, so it's kind of a big thank-you event, so we would love for families to come out to that," Mickletz said.

The event is more than just an excuse to eat pancakes, though.

"So we'll have the pancakes, of course, and then we'll also have a shorter walk, kind of an abbreviated version of our maple magic walks ... we'll have a summary of the process of getting maple syrup and how maple syrup is made," he said.

The nature center is packing the month with events for a good reason.

"February is really the only month you can do it due to the weather," Mardiney said. "You need really cold nights and warm days for the sap to start flowing ... it's kind of a neat thing to make people aware of that."

"It's a very seasonal thing," Mickletz said. "We have to do it in February in Maryland because it's the only time we can collect sap from the trees ... The flow of the sap in the tree has to do with the length of daylight and also the temperature outdoors. So we need freezing cold nights ideally and warmer days ideally."

Mickletz said another lesson people can learn through Maple Sugaring Month is how Maryland's climate lends itself to the maple sugaring process.

"It's really interesting in Maryland because the climate is just on the edge of what is good for producing maple sap for producing maple syrup ... we regularly get seasons that are too cold in February and seasons that are too warm in February but we'll still be able to get [a good supply] of sap but it will vary day to day," he said.

Some days people will see sap dripping fairly quickly, while "on other days it will be cold enough that there will be 'sapsicles' hanging from the trees and we'll be able to taste the sap from the 'sapsicle,' " he said.

"Obviously making maple syrup and maple sugaring is much more well known and common in New England and Canada, but you can do it as far south as Maryland and a lot of people don't realize that," Mardiney said. "It also makes people aware that you can make maple syrup

even in your own backyard if you want, assuming you have a maple tree."

Brown said the programs offer children the chance to learn not just about the process of maple sugaring, but also about the usefulness of trees beyond what many people might believe.

"Some kids are I think rather surprised at it. I think they're excited as to how it's made. They have an opportunity to taste real maple syrup as well as non-maple syrup or corn syrup that comes out of most of the produces that you buy in the store and they realize that there is a difference and I think it just opens up their eyes to ... the increased value of what a tree can bring to them, which is food besides cutting down a tree and turning it into boards to build houses," he said.

Mickletz said there's "a lot to learn" about maple sugaring. But, he said, a major part of Maple Sugaring Month is showing people just what nature — and their own neck of the woods — can offer.

"It really helps connect you to your food and your food sources and it's not very often we can say we get a food directly from nature and this is a food that nature gives us. Even with honeybees, they're imported from Europe, so this is a food source that is locally sourced, as local as you can get," he said.

Of course, the nature center also has maple syrup for sale in its store, as well as maple candy and other maple-related products.

And perhaps, the trip will inspire some families to tap their own maple syrup.

After all, as Brown said, "There's nothing like having real maple sugar on pancakes on a cold winter's day."

For more information and a full calendar of events, visit [www.explorenature.org/calendar/category/latest-events/](http://www.explorenature.org/calendar/category/latest-events/).

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