

SWEET SUCCESS

—Central NY students make their own maple syrup

By Chip Haley

Photos provided by author unless otherwise noted



James Clayton

Like the slow-dripping sap they collect from local maple trees and then transform into delicious syrup, the maple program at Vernon-Verona-Sherrill High School (VVS) in Oneida County has slowly developed over the years into a sweet success.

What began at the school's facility in 1992 as a pilot program through the district's Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter, has grown into a huge success

with more than 1,000 gallons of maple syrup produced last year. But the program doesn't stop there. Students have also made maple sugar, maple fluff, maple coffee, maple cream spread and cotton candy. A few years back, the school added a mobile maple trailer to take the program on the road to other schools—some as far away as New York City and Washington, D.C. The high school also hosts a maple con-

ference (the largest in the U.S. dedicated strictly to maple products) that last year attracted 925 participants from 13 states, and from Canada and Sweden.

Agriculture teacher Keith Schiebel has nurtured the program since its inception. Beginning around the end of February, approximately 25 of his students tap trees, insert spouts, install tubing or hang buckets and lids, collect sap, haul the sap with a

tractor and tanker, filter the sap at the sap house, operate an evaporator, and bottle and label the syrup and other products.

The high school owns 28 acres of woods (including 6 acres of maple trees), and the program manages two other sugarbushes as well. In addition, a fourth area is managed by a former student who sells the sap from his trees to the school's program. Combined, the four sugarbushes contain about 3,500 taps with tubing that carry sap to a collection tank, and a total of 600 buckets which must be emptied into a collection tank and then placed back on the tree tap.

Each year, Schiebel assigns students to various jobs, depending upon their maturity, ability, interest and availability. Older students teach the younger ones the fine art of maple tree tapping and maple syrup processing. They work during their agriculture class, as well as after school and on weekends. Some of the students spend as much as 20 hours or more a week during the season, either in the sugarbush or at the sugar house.

A few former students have gone on to manage their own sugarbush lots, while others are now involved in different types of farming. "Even if they are not involved in agriculture, many former students come back and tell me how grateful they are for the skills they learned," Schiebel says proudly. "They talk about how their involvement in Future Farmers of America and the maple program has helped them, whether with public speaking, job interviews or working with people."



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Students who participate in the maple program perform a number of tasks, including (clockwise from top) tapping trees, installing tubing, filtering sap at the sap house, and bottling the syrup.



Collecting sap from maple trees.

Schiebel's students join him on the Mobile Maple Trailer, making presentations at other schools, at community festivals and fairs. Among the stops for the trailer are the New York State Fair, the LaFayette Apple Fest, the Oneida County Farm Fest, Remsen Barn Festival, Otsego County Fair, and the Schoharie Maple Festival.

"When that trailer is out on the road... my students are the educators," Schiebel observed. "They get the chance to interact with elementary students and adults—some very engaged in agriculture themselves, others with very little ties to agriculture. The mobile maple vehicle has given us a lot of exposure, and has visited all over New York, and all five boroughs in New York City," he added.

A state maple queen and her princesses help promote maple products at various events each year. VVS has been fortunate and has crowned six maple queens or princesses since 2004. "It's rewarding for those kids to couple classroom experiences with a title that allows them to travel and promote the agriculture industry," Schiebel said.

All the maple products made by the students are inspected and licensed under the state Department of Agriculture and Markets. Profits from the sales of the products are "generally invested back into the program," the teacher explained. Those profits have helped to buy a reverse osmosis machine from a company in Vermont, which "really cut our hours of boiling, and fuel consumption." And the FFA recently ordered "a new electronic bottler... that will speed up our bottling next year." Schiebel said a website is also being developed, through the school's portal, so maple syrup lovers can order their favorite product online.

The VVS maple sugaring program recently received a \$57,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to allow them to harvest willow grown at the school, and purchase an evaporator that



will burn willow rather than fuel oil. This will require significant changes in the sap house to accommodate a new fuel source. Agriculture students will design, fund, and construct the building extensions to accommodate the new equipment.

As the program grows and evolves, Schiebel said he and his students will keep looking for ways to improve the product, increase production efficiency,

and discover new products and markets.

In the meantime, they will continue gathering sap each spring, and convert it into sweet success.

Chip Haley is the retired news editor of the *Rome Daily Sentinel*, and loves maple syrup on her pancakes.