

Syrup season in Lancaster

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Lancaster —

Do you know how sap changes from the liquid inside a maple tree to the syrup on top of your pancakes? Ask a Lancaster Cub Scout; he knows.

For the third year, local Scouts are making syrup — tapping trees, boiling syrup and bottling the final product. The production takes place on Brockelman Road, at the home of Cub Master Ken Rapoza. “This is a real sugar house,” he said. “This is not a toy.”

Rapoza farmed for many years in the western part of the state, he said, which was when he began making syrup each spring. Three years ago, the Cub Scout dads helped build a sugar shack on part of Rapoza’s five acres. The sizeable, open door structure has a large cooker in the middle, and there’s not room for much else. Sap travels from a 500-gallon tank into tiered louvers and is heated by a roaring wood fire. Rapoza has a spigot with which he can control the flow of the sap. It takes about five hours for the raw sap to yield syrup. “The trick is to try to keep it at the same boiling rate,” Rapoza said. “By the end, it just boils and boils. It just keeps going. ... When it gets rolling, it flows through at a gallon and a half a minute.” The Scouts are involved from beginning to end.

When the sugar season starts, they go all over Lancaster and tap trees — some on private property, some on town land — with the permission of the land owners. Once the sap starts flowing, the Scouts return each night, with Rapoza and other adult volunteers, to collect it. One tree usually yields about five gallons of raw sap, Rapoza said, and this year, there were nearly 100 trees to check. The sap is then transferred into a 500-gallon tank and pumped into the cooker, and the Scouts do it all. “I try to get the boys involved,” Rapoza said. “They help in all areas except for feeding the fire, and we’ve never had an injury or an accident.”

It takes a few weeks for the sap to get from a tree to one’s pancakes, and, as with other farming endeavors, the Scouts are partially dependent on the weather. Optimal conditions, Rapoza said, are freezing nights and above freezing days. The maple syrup is sold as the Scouts’ major fundraiser, and as far as Rapoza has been able to learn, his is the only Scout sugar house in the country.

Two years ago, the money was used to purchase the Pinewood Derby track. Last year, it was invested in holding barrels for the sugar shack. “I don’t know what Scouts would be like today without him,” Jason Allison said. Allison’s oldest son, Alex, is a Tiger Cub. “His dedication is unbelievable. ... It’s not even just the money; it’s all on his property, too. Everyone is very grateful.”

On a recent Sunday, Alex Allison was at the sugar house skimming the foam off the boiling syrup. Impurities bubble to the top of the syrup and have to be removed by hand. As he showed his 4-year-old brother, Andrew, the trick to skimming, he said while he liked the sugar house, he liked Scouts for more than that. “I like all the projects we make,” Alex said. “At Christmas we all made our moms a cutting board — it was a top secret project.” For 9-year-old Webelo Jack Leonard, the sugaring has been his favorite Scouting activity. “I think my favorite part is picking up the sap,” he said. “The buckets are extremely heavy, but I can pick one up that’s about a quarter of the way full.” Jack, who is in his fourth year of Scouting, has tasted both the beginning and end products. “The raw sap is like a sweet liquid; it runs like water,” he said. “The syrup is extremely sweet — it’s definitely much better [than store-bought.]”

To ensure the future of the sugaring business, Rapoza has applied for and received a grant to plant a grove of maple trees. The Lancaster Conservation Commission has approved his planting those saplings in a five-acre area at Eagle Ridge, and in about 25 years, Rapoza said, the Scouts will have its own sugar orchard.

For now, though, the Scouts rely on the kindness of community landowners, whom they pay with a pint of fresh syrup. Each Scout receives a pint for himself and the rest is sold for \$10 a bottle. “We’d like to get 50 gallons, which would be 400 pints,” Rapoza said, adding that there was no set end date for syrup production. “We stop when the sap stops running, or when we run out of wood.”

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Orlando Claffey/Wicked Local staff photographer

Ken Rapoza feeds a fire as cub scouts learn how to make maple syrup at his home in Lancaster Saturday.



Orlando Claffey/Wicked Local staff photographer

Jared Williams looks into a cooking vat of syrup as cub scouts learn how to make maple syrup at Ken Raposa home in Lancaster Saturday.



Orlando Claffey/Wicked Local staff photographer

Ken Raposa talks to cub scouts as they learn how to make maple syrup at his home in Lancaster Saturday.



Orlando Claffey/Wicked Local staff photographer

Ken Raposa teaches cub scouts how to make maple syrup at his home in Lancaster Saturday.



Orlando Claffey/Wicked Local staff photographer

Alexander Allison stacks firewood as cub scouts learn how to make maple syrup at Ken Raposa home in Lancaster Saturday.