

Proctor Woodlot Managed For Maple Sugaring Time Is Here The Enjoyment Of All

By Joe Lyle
Proctor Academy '05
Journalism class

Proctor Academy owns and maintains a 2,500 acre woodlot. Although the land is privately owned, it is still open to both people from Proctor and the general public. Many use it for recreational activities such as hiking, bird watching, tracking, hunting, and cross-country skiing in the winter.

Proctor prides itself on the idea that it is everybody's land and everybody should have the right to enjoy it.

Dave Pilla, a beloved outdoor teacher from Proctor, oversees its operation. Dave, who has been with the school for 25 years, is very thankful that the school was able to purchase the property over the years and help in its conservation. He is also concerned with the townspeople and public use.

I was lucky to take an outdoor Wildlife Science course with Dave this year and helped him with the winter wildlife inventory for the woodlot. We chatted

recently about some concerns about the woodlands. "Public use has been great thus far. I think it is important for people to enjoy the outdoors," stated Pilla.

There have only been a few minor incidents, such as vandalism, reported on the property this year. Dave was able to clean these areas up right away and has not seen any problems since.

For a while there was some confusion between Proctor and the townspeople because it was thought that the woodlot had been closed to public use. This, in fact, was not true. "This is the people's land and the last thing I would want to see is it closed off to them," said Pilla. "Even though there was a little case of vandalism, it was by no means great enough to close off the entire property to the public. I want to see people out here enjoying it."

Dave's goal is to help educate so that future generations will be able to enjoy it as we do now. He wants to show people the correct land use techniques and the importance of keeping the land in healthy condition.

Dave does these things with not only the school in mind but the people of Andover as well. It would be a shame not to be able to enjoy these woodlands one day.

Dave Pilla and the Proctor community once again invite all to come out and enjoy the Proctor woodlands.

By Jen Kramer
Proctor Academy '05
Journalism class

Native Americans were New England's first maple sugarers, but the tradition has been carried on for centuries. Originally sap was gathered with a bucket and crude tap system, and then boiled down to produce the syrup. These days, things have gotten a little more high-tech.

Commonly done in New England and Canada, the sugaring process usually takes place in late February to early April. The season lasts generally between six and eight weeks. Dave Pilla, Land Manager for Proctor Academy, explains that sugaring really helps some people to get through the transitional March weather. During this time it is often too wet to work on the land, and sugaring offers people the perfect outdoor activity.

At Proctor, Dave sugars for educational reasons. Every spring during Proctor's project period, Dave offers a maple sugaring activity. For one week, 10 to 15 students work with Dave to help produce Proctor's very own maple syrup. The students learn how to collect the sap, how to process it, and also some general background information about the trees themselves.

Proctor's sugaring operation is very "tree friendly." Dave took some time out of his woodland duties to teach me a little about how sugaring affects a maple tree.

During the winter, all the excess sugar from the past year is stored in the tree's root system. When the air gets warmer, the sap begins to flow up to the top of the tree to create the foliage for that spring and summer.

Sugarers simply collect some of that sap as it rises to the top. However, the trees do not have an endless supply of sap, and one must be careful not to take too much from one tree. Some of the bigger trees can hold three taps, but a small tree might be limited to one tap.

The taps themselves also hurt the tree. When the taps are set, the tree immediately begins to try to repair the tap hole. The spot in which the tap is inserted will slowly deaden, and eventually no sap will be able to get out. Dave had recently cut down an old sugar maple, so I was able to take a look. Dark spots formed in the wood where the tree had been tapped in past years. That mark will remain as a permanent scar in the tree.

Several local people are involved in the sugaring business. Jeff Sweet is one of them. Jeff, who works on the Proctor maintenance team, owns a property in Newbury with his brothers where they run their own small sugaring business.

They maintain roughly 2,200 taps and produce anywhere from 330 to 777 gallons of syrup per year. Jeff's farm runs on a vacuum system, so all of the sap is drawn directly to the sugarhouse. Once in the sugarhouse, the sap gets boiled, goes through a filter press, is heated again to at least 180 degrees, then poured into bottles to be sold.

Syrup is not the only thing produced from the sap. Jeff also sells maple cream and maple candy at his store. Block sugar and granulated sugar can also be products of the sap but are less likely to be found at small sugarhouses.

People are involved in sugaring for many different reasons, but all agree that it is something you need to enjoy. Sugaring is a lot of work, but it can also be very rewarding.

This time-honored New England tradition seems to still be going strong in the Andover area, so visit an operation and see the sweet side of the mud season this spring.

I Remember When...

"I remember when Rocky's Roost served pizza in the Proctor Block."

- Mark Stetson

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