

?Sugaring Aurora? is sweet community success story



Spring is just around the corner, the sap is flowing, and families are flocking to sugar bushes to sample Canada's most iconic flavour.

But some local maple syrup enthusiasts don't have very far to go.

In Aurora's northeast, neighbours have banded together to tap their trees as a collective, building an unexpected community in the process.

It all started when the father-in-law of resident Dave Hunt cast his expert eye across Hunt's yard and saw nothing but possibilities. A veteran tree-tapper going back 30 years, he determined Dave had five trees ready to go and, before the season was up, he collected 160 litres of sap, resulting in 3.5 litres of the sweet stuff.

?I was totally psyched,? says Dave, adding he initially thought he would be lending a hand to his father-in-law, before getting immersed in a small-scale side-hustle.

Before long, however, neighbourhood curiosity was piqued.

Then Dave spotted similar trees in the backyard of Jim Stewart (The Auroran's sports writer).

?One day in the Spring, Jim was out gardening, I introduced myself, and had barely finished the sentence before he said he was in,? Dave recalls. ?He called me the next day [and more neighbours were in], including Rob, and what started off as just expecting Jim, we had five of us in for the next year. Not many people say no to maple syrup!?

Now, they've nearly hit 20 households involved in what Dave describes as the ?Sugaring Aurora? project.

In these early days, it was a very hands-on process. Trees were initially tapped into traditional metal and plastic pails, which were then hauled to the Dave's wood-fired evaporator.

?We usually seem to have at least one Saturday a year where the temperature is perfect, the sun is out, people are walking in the neighbourhood, and there are usually many neighbours on speed dial who will rush out between 2 and 4 p.m., grab the pails, wheel them over in their grandkids' wagons. They know what to do ? they pour it into the system and wheel back their empty pails. People in the neighbourhood just come by, pop their head in to see what's going on, and we were part of a community.

“We started with the buckets and now we have lines – almost 2,500 feet of tubing running through all the backyards now. Because we have had some seniors helping us in the past, we wanted to make [the process] as quick as possible. We had four collection sites and that made a big difference.”

Also making a big difference is science, with the latest addition of a reverse osmosis machine helping to increase syrup yields – a welcome development for the neighbours who share the costs of production and divvy the results up by labour and the number of their own trees involved.

Along the way they received helpful expertise from friends spearheading similar projects in the Oro-Medonte area, as well as in Facebook groups dedicated to the “backyarder.”

“When I joined the Facebook group ‘Ontario Backyarders’ I think there were about 800 of us and through COVID it’s more than 9,000. The thing about it very simply is it just brought people together. Jim and Rob, for instance, their kids are very different ages but they’ve been involved in community sport for all their kids’ years and never really met each other. Now, they’re good pals. It has brought us together. Those of us participating have gotten to know each other much better and are sharing the experience as much as possible. We call it the ‘Sugaring Aurora Project’ and it’s totally a community thing.”

And it’s a community, he indicates, could continue to grow over a shared love for one of our favourite exports.

“This must have been a maple grove before they put a subdivision in because they’re all through our backyards and these aren’t even the best trees,” he says. “The best ones are untouched and, wow, these things are spectacular.”

By Brock Weir
EditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter