

Royal Three-Peat? Sugaring Aurora Project vies for third consecutive maple syrup Gold Medal at 2025 Winter Fair



Dave Hunt and Rob Gaby's Rite of Spring commences when daily temperatures stay between -5 to +5 ° the ideal range that initiates the sweet process of sap flow and maple syrup production in their northwest Aurora neighborhood.

Since 2019, Hunt and Gaby have been encouraging their neighbors to join them in their "sappy" pursuit of perfect organic maple syrup.

The Dynamic Duo has led an intrepid team of tappers, sap line stringers, pail content collectors, boilers, and bottlers who will collect thousands of liters of sap from their maple trees in the Oak Ridges Moraine and boil it into approximately 125 liters of Royal Agricultural Winter Fair Gold Medal-Winning Organic Syrup.

It's been a Gold Rush for the Sugaring Aurora Project (SAP) over the last two years. The Aurora-based group captured the Gold Medal in the Hobby category at 'The Royal' in 2023 and 2024.

The core group of Sappers attend to myriad tasks through the neighborhood in their custom-made red and black plaid jackets with "Sugaring Aurora Project ' Royal Winter Fair Gold Medal Maple Syrup Winners 2023 "emblazoned in gold lettering on the back.

These are halcyon times for the group of neighbors who hail from a variety of professions and backgrounds, but are bound and unified by the sweet art of creating a charming product.

The aroma of boiling, bubbling Maple Syrup on a three-channel evaporator superheated by a woodstove on a spring evening in the Sugar Shack on Tribbling Crescent is the quintessential Canadian sensory experience.

The 'Sugaring Aurora Project' is the brainchild of retired high school teacher Dave Hunt. The fearless leader of the neighborhood initiative observed that, 'the best part of SAP has to be the opportunity to work with my neighbors to bring the whole experience from tree sap all the way to maple syrup. Although it is a huge amount of work and time-consuming, the end is worth the journey.'

Hunt's next-door neighbor Rob Gaby—who is second-in-command and runs an efficient crew when Hunt is away due to National

Team paddling obligations?discussed the many benefits of the journey.

?I've developed many great relationships with neighbors that I mightn't have developed otherwise. There is a tremendous sense of community spirit and accomplishment in our efforts, including our recent successes at the Royal Winter Fair. I am very proud of spreading our story by presenting our community project to people in and around the community through word of mouth and more formal presentations. I am also proud that this has become an annual event celebrating the beginning of Spring. I get a tremendous sense of self-satisfaction in producing something tangible in a team environment that embodies a Canadian tradition.?

Another neighbor who enjoys the Canadian tradition to which Gaby refers is Jamie Wood who noted, ?there's something incredibly rewarding about being part of this iconic Canadian process?from the tapping of trees to the sweet reward of syrup that will last us from the final boil this year to the first run of sap next year. But beyond the syrup, it's the sense of community and the friendships that truly make this neighborhood project special. Sharing this tradition with friends and neighbours not only connects us to nature?the land, the trees, and the weather?but to one another.?

This sense of connectivity is evident to Wood's neighbor, Gemma Bernardo, who responded to a community canvas by Hunt and Gaby during the darkest days of the Pandemic.

?I never thought when Dave Hunt and his buddies knocked on my door several years ago?telling me that I had sugar maples in my backyard and asking could they tap them?that I would meet such energetic, interesting, talented, warm, and friendly neighbors. I learned so much more about maple syrup making and what this marvelous nectar from our beautiful ancient trees offered. It has all been a gift at this point in my life and I am grateful for the camaraderie.?

Julia Spittel, who graciously serves the group as ?Hostess of the Sugar Shack?, concurs with Bernardo's assessment of SAP's benefits and maintains that it's been ?an endeavor that has turned neighbors into friends.?

SAP completed its first boil of 2025 in Spittel and Hunt's backyard on Tuesday, March 13 ? on the fifth anniversary of the pandemic shutdown.

Boiling 400 liters of sap into 12 liters of syrup was a labor of love for the 17 families involved and a sweet way to unify a neighborhood in these divisive times.

As of Thursday, April 3, SAP had produced over 95 liters of liquid gold. Perhaps as many as three of the group's most recent batches will be worthy entries to the 2025 Royal Winter Fair as SAP aims for a three-peat in the Hobby Category.

By Jim Stewart