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The sap flowed early and fast this winter, and the Mapleberg trees produced a bumper crop of maple syrup.

Some say maple syrup flows through Bob “Bergie” Bergschultz’s veins.

When maple syrup season begins, he is in his glory, collecting sap the old-fashioned way, then cooking it down in a more modern, yet low-tech evaporator that requires lots of wood to turn the sap into sweet syrup.

This season has been the earliest, and one of the best, Bergschultz can remember in the 31 years of tapping his own trees. He made 14 gallons of syrup.

He keeps about half for his family — sending plenty to his son Casey, daughter-in-law and two grandsons in Missoula, Mont. — and sells the remainder at the Port Washington farmers’ market under the name Mapleberg. That’s what he named the sugaring shack where he makes syrup.

Bergschultz lives along the Milwaukee River in rural Fredonia with his wife Lynne and has plenty of trees to tap.

He learned to make maple syrup at Riveredge Nature Center, where the couple volunteer for a variety of programs. Lynne contributes her artistic talents, while Bergschultz prefers working outdoors.

He used to participate with fervor in the maple sugarin’ season at the center, sometimes tending the fire through the night or flipping pancakes for schoolchildren and youths who come to the center to the learn the magic of making maple syrup.

Since his season ended so early, Bergschultz plans to help Riveredge with its maple syrup open house on Saturday, March 24.

Bergschultz decided to tap maple trees on his property in 1971, improvising with the basics he learned at Riveredge’s large operation.

“I started with tapping four trees and it got bigger and bigger,” he said. “This year I had 74

taps."

Some large trees had two taps, with buckets or bags hung on the trunks to collect sap that started flowing in mid-February.

Warm weather ended this season earlier than usual.

For the sap to run freely, the nights must be freezing and the daytime temperatures 40 to 45 degrees. If there is a strong cold wind, the sap may stop flowing. If it stays warm too long, the trees begin budding out and the sap is bitter, Bergschultz said.

"It's one thing we don't have much control over," he said. "Mother Nature controls the sap."

When Bergschultz became an amateur maple syrup maker, he joined a club started by Andy Larsen, emeritus executive director of Riveredge.

"People came out of the woodwork," Bergschultz said. "It was unbelievable how many people were making maple syrup."

Members shared techniques and equipment.

Bergschultz bought a hobby-size evaporator that helps regulate the temperature of the sap. The sap becomes sugar when it is 67% sugar. Bergschultz uses a hydrometer to measure the sugar content.

Bergschultz tends the evaporator every day during the season. His wife helps collect the sap and filters and bottles the syrup.

Bergschultz equipped a 1976 Simplicity tractor with 33-gallon containers. He drives the tractor through the sugar bush to collect the sap. The sap is then pumped from the tractor into the evaporator.

Sap from trees in the valley along the river is put into large containers, then pumped to the tractor.

In the sugaring shack, steam from the evaporator rises as the sap is boiled down to syrup. It takes about 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup.

"Making maple syrup is the perfect thing to do this time of year when it's usually cold and muddy," Lynne said. "It really is magic the way evaporation and carmelization turns the clear, tasteless sap into sweet, golden brown syrup."

It's a process that fascinates Bergschultz.

“I just feel good out there,” he said. “I feel I’m out there for a reason. It’s so crisp out and pretty. Sometimes, I just meditate.

“Trouble is I always think of things I should be adding (to his maple syrup operation).

“Sometimes customers will come out with their children. I’ll do a little program for them and Lynne may make pancakes.”

On Saturday, they hosted 20 people, including many children, who ran around and ate pancakes and dill pickles with syrup.

“Children love eating pickles with syrup,” said Lynne, noting that’s something she learned at Riveredge.

“One mother asked if I made the pickles, too. No, I don’t, but I do spin my own wool (for the hats, scarves and mittens she makes).”

The couple live simply and heat their house primarily with wood. They like doing some things the old-fashioned way.

“We both enjoy it and feel fortunate we can do this,” Bergschultz said.

Image Information: Bob Bergschultz carried a bucket of sap through the maple woods on his rural Fredonia property. Photo by Sam Arendt