PLUM HOLLOW FARMER FAMOUS

Viewed from the roadside, across an ancient snake-fence, the maple trees in Frank Tackaberry's woodlot at Plum Hollow, Ontario, look like any others. Yet they are internationally famous.

In competition with North America's finest, in New York State's second annual maple festival on May 4 at Syracuse, maple syrup from Mr. Tackaberry's trees was adjudged second best by taste-test. Syrup from the farm of J.H. Fedden and Sons, Woodstock, New Hampshire, placed first. Other competitors were from New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin.

In Canada, Quebec and Ontario are the big maple syrup provinces. Quebec produces a bit more than Ontario's million dollar crop. In 1910, Ontario produced close to half a million gallons. Today's crop is less than half that figure but the price per gallon is four to six times higher.

The Tackaberry farm at Plum Hollow--a picturesque valley 20 miles northwest of Brockville--is 250 acres, of which about half is wooded. In this woodland are many maples, ranging from tiny seedlings to giant patriarchs four feet in diameter. About 4,500 mature trees are tapped annually.

But they are not tapped to capacity. Mr. Tackaberry produces only about 300 to 450 gallons each year. Production varies each year with the weather, he says, but the big handicap to full utilization is the constant shortage of labour.

Asked why one maple syrup is better than another, Mr. Tackaberry replied that it's probably a matter of processing. All native North American maple trees yield sap that can be made into syrup, he explained, but only the hard (sugar), black, red and silver maple are tapped commercially. The hard maple and variant black maple are the best producers.

But, said Mr. Tackaberry, when the sap is drawn from the tree it has neither the taste nor colour of maple syrup. That one maple syrup should taste better than another must, therefore, depend largely on the processor.

The trees must be tapped at just the right time. When winter eases its icy grip--when daytime temperatures rise well above freezing but fall below 32 degrees fahrenheit at night--in late February to late March--the time is ripe. The season may last a month or be over in eight to ten days.

Tests reveal that the sap produced by a maple tree is proportionate to its crown area. The yield per acre is usually higher is forest stands than in open stands. An average syrup crop may run as high as seven gallons per acre. Cull and over-mature trees will remain good producers only as long as they retain healthy crowns and root systems.

It's no easy job to tap maple trees and process the syrup. At tapping time, the snow in the bush is usually deep and trails must be broken. From two to four holes--extending two to three inches into the sapwood--must be bored in each tree at a height of three to four feet above ground. A spile is then driven into each hole and a bucket hung on it to catch the sap.

In the old days the men who carried the sap buckets from the trees to the big kettles wore yokes that fitted their shoulders. They walked on snowshoes. Today, huge metal sap-tanks are mounted on sleighs or wagons. Horses--in some areas, tractors--haul the tanks through the bush from tree to tree and back to the "sugar house". The tanks are equipped with anti-splash flanges. Perforated cones, inverted in a depressed opening in the top of the sap tanks, intercept twigs and other foreign matter that may have fallen into the sap collecting buckets.

One end of Mr. Tackaberry's "sugar house" is stacked high with firewood--about 50 cords, cut during the winter--of which more than 25 cords will be burned in a season to keep the big evaporators at 216 degrees to 221 degrees fahrenheit, the usual processing temperatures.

As the liquid thickens in the evaporators the maple flavour and colour becomes more and more pronounced. Subsequent heating, until sufficient water has been evaporated to cause the boiling point to rise to 240 degrees or 255 degrees fahrenheit, will produce a strongly flavoured, highly coloured maple syrup. This liquid must be held at these high temperatures for about two hours without further loss of water by means of a reflex condenser. In cooling, an amount of water equivalent to that evaporated is added.

While still hot, the syrup is filtered into settling cans where it remains for 24 hours. These cans are equipped with spigots so placed that the sediment will not enter the gallon or half-gallon tins in which the syrup is marketed. Standard maple syrup weighs 13.2 pounds per imperial gallon. Hydrometers are used to check the density.

In addition to his extensive farming operations and production of award winning maple syrup, Frank Tackaberry has been president of his district's telephone company for 17 years, is an active member of the area's school board and leader in many other Plum Hollow community activities. Mrs. Tackaberry is his devoted secretary and faithful monitor.

Mr. Tackaberry ships maple syrup to customers in Vancouver, Saskatoon, Calgary and Toronto, and to "maple syrup clubs" composed of Members of Parliament at Ottawa and Toronto.

"For some reason I have never been able to fill all the orders and requests I receive for my maple syrup," says Mr. Tackaberry.

Perhaps the mystery was solved at Syracuse last May 4.