



# Sticky Situation:

Sugar Maple prized for white lumber, loved for sweet sap

by Jim Lundstrom

*Acer saccharum* – otherwise known as the majestic sugar maple – has split the world into two camps.

On one side we have people such as Steve Pauloski, who looks at a hardwood maple tree stand and sees stacks of creamy, top-grade lumber that yields top dollar for a variety of highly visible uses. “The highest price for hard maple is paid for the white sapwood outside. It’s got a very small heart of dark wood surrounded by cream-colored wood. That’s what has the most value,” says Pauloski, a former logger and now a timber buyer for Leer Wood of Westby, Wisconsin.

On the other side are folks like Peter Roth who look at the same stand and see a sugar bush full of sap just waiting to be converted into sweet maple syrup. “I’ve got good friends who are loggers and foresters. We have two completely different perspectives of the woods,” said Roth, a second-generation commercial maple syrup producer and buyer who owns and operates Roth Sugar Bush of Cadott, Wisconsin, with his wife, Dawn.

“Foresters manage timber for logs,” Roth said. “There are very, very few that manage for maple syrup. They want all logs, small crowns. We want to thin the woods a bit and have big crowns, bushy trees. I want a check from the trees every year, not just one check when trees are harvested.”

For the record, Pauloski is all for maple syrup production. “I used to do it as a kid myself,” he said. “We used to carry five-gallon buckets full of sap back to the house and boil them down for syrup. It’s great. I love it.” But he also thinks people should be aware that by tapping a tree, you are relegating its ultimate future to that of #2 or #3 common lumber instead of the more lucrative select grades that an untapped maple can command.

When a hole is drilled and a spigot placed into the tree, the virgin white wood around the wound becomes stained. “All that white wood starts turning to either a light brown or black color,” Pauloski said. “When we get those type of logs into the sawmill, they

may look in good shape, but you saw them open and you have all these black or brown rays. That automatically drops it down 1 to 3 grades, depending on how much stain there is. It’s considered a defect.”

Pauloski said stained maple can cut the price by half or more. “If a board foot of good wood is going for \$1, that log could drop down to 50 cents per foot if it wasn’t too bad, or even 5 cents per foot if it’s dark wood all over the place. You can still market it, but it goes for low-grade lumber. The value is distinctly changed,” he said. “There is an argument that you get the value out of the maple syrup and take a lower value from the lumber and come up with the same total value over the life of the tree. That’s probably true.”

Still, Pauloski said landowners should at least know these things. “My recommendation to most landowners, who talk about using their trees for maple syrup versus lumbering it off, should pick out trees that are of poorer quality to tap and leave the ones that are good quality veneer trees. You can pick them out if you run into a stand of maple. There are always some cull trees or poorer quality trees. You can tap those because they’re going to have #2 common lumber or lower anyway.”

Roth has several counters to the economic issue of potentially stained lumber in tapped trees. “What they don’t tell you is that only one log in 50 is good for veneer, so you’re not really losing anything,” he said.

Perhaps an even greater incentive, he says, is that by having a for-profit maple syrup operation on your land, your land can be classified and assessed at the much lower agricultural land rate. “In the maple industry, if you have 40 acres and tap trees on it, you are taxed like agriculture, the same as the farmer’s hayfield next to it,” Roth said. “My 40 around the house that I tap, I pay \$100 a year for taxes and I’m not in any programs. I have 40 acres up north that I deer hunt on and I pay \$1,000 a year up there. It can be a win-win situation for people.” ▲