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In School

## Learning is sweet at Unionville's Maple Syrup Day

By Brittani Howell The Herald-Times Mar 10, 2019

UNIONVILLE — Outside Unionville Elementary, Shane Gibson of Sycamore Land Trust kept a pan full of sap on a rolling boil atop a wood-burning stove, sending sweet-smelling steam and wood smoke into the air.

It can take 40 gallons of sap — sometimes even as much as 80 gallons, depending on the concentration of sugar in the sap — to make just one gallon of maple syrup, and it takes a long time to boil all the water off.

Rosy-cheeked from the cold, students sat around the stove Thursday as Gibson quizzed them: “What’s the job of the leaves on the trees?” It took them a few tries, but then they remembered the answer from a lesson Gibson had taught them earlier in the year: to make the trees food, which is sugar. The roots bring up water, and when that water and sugar mixes together, it makes sap, which is only about 2 percent sugar.

Gibson showed them how to make a spile — a small wooden peg used to control air flow in a cask or to tap a tree — by burning out the center of an elderberry twig. The process creates a little straw that is driven into a tree so that the sap can drip out.

Then he allowed students to partake in the main event: eating the sap and the syrup.

Maple syrup is boiled into Indiana culture, and Unionville’s first Maple Syrup Day gave students a literal taste of that culture.

Not far from the tasting station, another group of students listened to educators from Bradford Woods talk about the syrup-making methods of the Native Americans and pioneer settlers, and examined tools such as hand drills and yokes that were used during the syrup-making process.

Inside the school, more Bradford Woods volunteers taught students about tall tales and legends surrounding maple syrup, and had students make up their own.



Third graders Norah Cain, left, and Tucker Young taste samples of sweet tree sap and samples of maple syrup Thursday as students learn about the maple syrup-making process at Unionville Elementary School. (Chris Howell / Herald-Times)

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Sugar water from maple trees is boiled down into maple syrup Thursday. (Chris Howell / Herald-Times)

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Students learn about tools used to tap sugar maple trees to gather sap and make maple syrup Thursday at Unionville Elementary School. (Chris Howell / Herald-Times)

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Classes rotated through the three stations all day, getting a multifaceted lesson on maple syrup. The day itself wasn't the only component of the lesson: In fact, students had started learning about maple syrup months before, when Gibson came in to talk about the science behind photosynthesis, sap and syrup-making, as well as techniques used to extract sap from trees.

Then Unionville sent out an invitation to parents: If they had maple trees on their property, or had access to maple trees through friends or neighbors, would they be willing to tap the trees with their students to provide the sap for syrup day?

They would. Throughout Thursday's activities, minivans and trucks drove through the parking lot to drop off jugs and buckets brimming with sweet sap.

“It was just a neat way to go outside and learn together,” said principal Lily Albright. The activity gave families “an opportunity to go outside and learn together.”

The activity dovetails well into Unionville’s mission. The small, rural elementary school is pioneering a homegrown curriculum called E.A.R.T.H.: environment, art, resources, technology and health. The curriculum earned Unionville the Indiana Outdoor Lab of 2018 award, as well as a nomination as a National Blue Ribbon School. It highlights the natural resources available in southern Indiana, and maple syrup-making fit in perfectly, particularly since students were able to engage in every part of the process in a hands-on way.

“For me, I love when education becomes so holistic,” Gibson said. Taking them through the process from start to finish, and weaving together science, history, engineering and the outdoors, is a perfect example — and a bonus during the winter months. “They are getting connected to nature at a time when most people don’t even go outside.”



Shane Gibson, with Sycamore Land Trust, describes to Unionville Elementary School students Thursday how maple syrup is made. (Chris Howell / Herald-Times)

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Contact Brittani Howell at 812-331-4243 or [bhowell@heraldt.com](mailto:bhowell@heraldt.com).

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