

**NINA MOINI:** Many Minnesotans are currently experiencing the sweet spot of a generations-old springtime tradition. I'm talking about tapping trees for maple syrup. The time to tap comes right around now, each year, as the temperature is sort of wobbling between freezing overnight and thawing into the 40s, 50s during the day.

And this time of year is not just about making a sweet treat to add to our pancakes. It's a long process that invites people to pause, to observe the details of the earth waking up from winter. That's what an upcoming event in Grand Rapids aims to encourage. The Forest History Center is celebrating this spring with an event called Maple, Music, and Phenology.

The center's program supervisor, Bryan French, is boiling gallons upon gallons of maple sap to make syrup for the event Saturday afternoon. He's on the line now to tell us more. Thanks so much for your time, Bryan.

**BRYAN** Oh, happy to be here.

**FRENCH:**

**NINA MOINI:** Sounds like you had to take a break from a lot of tapping to come on with us today. [LAUGHS] I have here that you've tapped about 25 maple trees on the Forest History Center grounds. Is that a lot? Give me some perspective on that.

**BRYAN** Sure. So I have a number of friends who have one or two maple trees in their front yard, and that's what they tap. And they'll boil them down. And I've got another friend who lives in Duluth, and he said, last I talked with him, he had 98 trees that were tapped on a pretty big sugar bush.

**FRENCH:**

And so, I mean, 25 is a good number. We're going to end up with a lot of sap. We've already got about 60 gallons that we're storing in some steel garbage cans that have a liner in them. And so is it a lot? I mean, it's all relative. I think it's a lot more than a normal family might need to tap.

**NINA MOINI:** Sure. [LAUGHS] Can you walk us through the process of making syrup? I've never done it. I've watched people do it. I've never been a part of the process myself. Can you give us the summary of how it all works?

**BRYAN** Sure, yeah. So some people find that it's easiest to mark their maple trees when they can still see the leaves. So the summer or fall before, they might put a piece of ribbon around the tree just to say, this is a maple tree. But eventually, if you know your trees, then you can walk through the woods, and you can see one of the fun things about maple trees.

**FRENCH:**

Most trees, especially the deciduous trees, have either alternate branches, or opposite branches. And maple trees are one of the trees that have opposite branches. And so every time a new twig comes out, a little bud, there's always one on one side of the branch and one on the exact same other side of the branch. And so that's one good method for identifying.

Now, of course, we've been tapping trees for a long time here. And so we also know that, oh, we're going to get this one because this has always been a good producer. Once you've got your trees identified, then you go with a drill, and you make a hole, maybe a half an inch hole in the bark, about an inch and a half, 2 inches deep. And you insert into that hole a metal-- today, it's usually-- metal spile, S-P-I-L-E. And the spile is just a tube that goes from where you made that hole in the tree.

So that goes in on one end, and then on the other end, because it's a tube, the sap flows through the tube. And the metal spile often has a little hook. And you'll hook your bucket or your bag to that. And then the drip just goes down into your container. And then every day, every couple of days, depending on the weather-- and it's like you were talking about. If it's a good cold at night, warm in the day, that's perfect for getting the sap to flow up and down the tree.

So then you'll collect your sap, and you'll store it. If it's not going to be a while until you do your boil, then it's usually a good idea to put your sap maybe into the fridge or into the freezer until you're ready to boil. And then once you're ready to boil, you take all that sap, and you get your fire going.

And I mean, for us, one of the reasons that we're doing Maple, Music, and Phonology is, it's great to get together with friends, sit around the fire, and play some music on the guitar or on the accordion, wander through the woods to see if you can see any of the first little wildflowers poking their heads through, or listen to see if you can hear any of the spring migrants coming through, some of the birds. So that's the process.

And then, of course, once you've boiled down your sap, it usually takes, on average-- and of course, every tree is a little bit different. But on average, you're going to get about 1 gallon of syrup for every 40 gallons of sap. And that's a lot of sap. And so we're going to be doing a lot of boiling. And it takes a long time to boil it down. Once the sugar content is just right, then we'll take it off. We'll pour it into our containers and bottle it up.

**NINA MOINI:** How has the weather been this year for getting that sap flowing? And in recent years, is it getting earlier, do you think, in the year?

**BRYAN** I would not. Yeah, it's so variable because we always have a couple of weeks where, oh, my gosh, it's so nice out.  
**FRENCH:** And then--

**NINA MOINI:** Fake spring.

**BRYAN** We had that. Yeah, and then right after that, we just came right back with a vengeance. It was cold. And we had  
**FRENCH:** lots of snow. And I mean, having been doing this for a while, is there normal? I mean, there's average and mean.

But it feels like every year, you get excited, and then, oh, no, let's put the brakes on. Let's just sit back a little bit. And then, oh, here it comes. This is it. So on average, is it changing? I mean, probably it is. But that also feels like the-- the part of the process is getting excited, reining in your expectations, and then getting excited again.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah, let's dive into the phonology part of the event. Can you talk about first what it is--

**BRYAN** Sure.  
**FRENCH:**

**NINA MOINI:** --and what signs of spring you've been seeing?

**BRYAN** You bet. So phenology is the observation of seasonal changes in nature. There's a lot of different definitions of phenology, but that's kind of a generally accepted, where you're looking to see what are the markers. And so whether that's what's the first day that ice is out on your lake, or what's the first day that if you've got a thermometer in your lake-- some people like to measure until the first day that it hits 35 degrees or 40 degrees in the water.

Or when is the first Canada goose that's coming back? If you haven't had Canada geese all winter long, then not seeing them for a while, it makes it very clear, aha, there it is. And I just saw my first Canada goose about eight days ago.

**NINA MOINI:** Oh!

**BRYAN** So that was kind of one of my little markers that I keep track of. There's a tree that we have here, and every spring there's a little bit of hepatica right at the bottom of the tree.

**NINA MOINI:** Oh!

**BRYAN** And it just sits there, but as soon as it's warm enough, it will perk up, and it'll start to say, aha, it is time. And so those are some of the things that I look for. Of course, it's a little bit too early for all of the warblers, the wood warblers that we're excited to see. The hummingbirds are still far off. We won't see those for a while. But they're on their way.

So phenology is something that happens all year long, and we look forward to all the changes as they come. And maple syrup is just one of those things that we mark those changes of season.

**NINA MOINI:** Yeah. We have just about a minute left, but I bet the Forest History Center has so much to do. It sounds like a lovely spot. I'd love to visit at some point there in Grand Rapids.

**BRYAN** Oh, we'd love to have you. Yeah.

**FRENCH:**

**NINA MOINI:** What else can folks do this Saturday? How can they be a part of the fun?

**BRYAN** You bet. So we do call it Maple, Music, and Phenology. And so bring your musical instrument, and join us around the fire. We've got folks with fiddles and banjos and guitars and accordions and people that are just singing songs. So that's one thing. The phenology part, we'll have a couple of guided hikes over the day. We also have six big draft horses, and they'll be moving around our 200-acre site.

And so there's lots of things to see and do. We will have our historic 1900 logging camp open so that people can wander around and see what life would have been like for a logger, a lumberjack back in 1900. So lots to see and do.

**NINA MOINI:** [LAUGHS] All right. And folks can get tickets online.

**BRYAN** Yep, or they can just show up right at the door.

**FRENCH:**

**NINA MOINI:** All right. Bryan, thank you so much for coming on *Minnesota Now* and telling us all about it. We'll let you get back to tapping. [LAUGHS]

**BRYAN** Thank you so much.

**FRENCH:**

**NINA MOINI:** All right. That was Bryan French, the program supervisor at the Forest History Center in Grand Rapids here in Minnesota.