



## Maple syrup an untapped resource in Illinois

by [Bridget Macdonald](#)  
March 04, 2009

With temperatures breaking into the 40s for the second consecutive week in Illinois, sap is beginning to rise in sugar maples, feeding the state's lucrative yet undeveloped maple syrup industry. Although the state's output of around 1,800 gallons each year is a drop in the bucket compared with the 500,000 gallons produced by leading Vermont in 2008, with only one major producer in Illinois, the maple syrup market is an untapped resource.

"As far as I know, we're the only commercial producer in the state," said Debby Funk, of Funk's Grove Pure Maple Sirup in Shirley, about 130 miles southwest of Chicago. Having cornered the market, the Funks have the leeway to spell syrup with an "i" in accordance with the original Webster's Dictionary. "All the airport gift shops carry our half pints," Funk added.

Syrup is also made commercially at the Forest Glen Preserve in Westville, about 175 miles southwest of Chicago, as part of a conservation education program to support the Vermillion County Conservation District, but the park produces a paltry 80 gallons, compared with the Funks 1,800-gallon annual output.

While Midwest neighbors Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin are among the top 10 maple-syrup producers nationwide, with outputs of 130,000 gallons, 118,000 gallons, and 100,000 gallons respectively in 2008, Illinois does not produce enough to participate in the national maple survey, according to Angie Considine of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

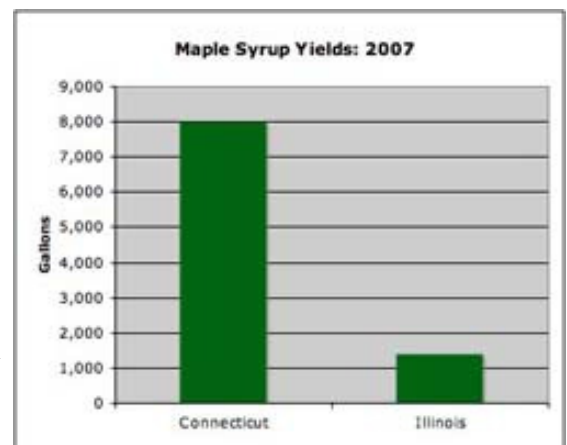
A 2004 study funded by the Illinois Department of Agriculture reported that 1.8 million acres of the state's 4.3 million acres of woodlands, or 42 percent, are encompassed within existing farmland. The study speculated that a 20-acre stand of sugar maples, supporting 1,000 taps, could add \$7,146 to the income of a farm producing 50 acres each of corn and soybeans.

Although the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that syrup was produced on 32 of the states 76,860 farms in 2007, Funk's Grove remains the lone retailer of what's known by some people as "white gold." She said as with any other crop, the profitability of maple syrup is incumbent upon the right weather conditions. "In a bad year, we only make 800 gallons, and in a really good year, we make 2,000 gallons," Funk explained.



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Demand is sweet in the maple syrup market. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average price increased by 6.1 percent in 2007, up to \$33.20 per gallon from \$31.30 per gallon in 2006.



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With an output of around 8,000 gallons per year, Connecticut is the smallest producer in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's maple-syrup survey. Illinois, which tops out at around 2,000 gallons, does not qualify to participate.

In 2009, she said, the price of her family's maple syrup will go up 4.5 percent, to \$46 per gallon from \$44 per gallon in 2008. While an output of 1,800 gallons would have amounted to \$79,200 in sales in 2008, this year, the same volume would generate \$82,800. Forest Glen sells syrup for about \$8 per pint, the equivalent of \$64 per gallon.

The USDA has not released average maple syrup prices for 2008, but the price increased by 6.1 percent in 2007 to \$33.20 per gallon from \$31.30 per gallon in 2006.

"Syrup prices have skyrocketed over the last few years," said Jerry Leahy, a ranger at Forest Glen, though he noted that despite soaring demand, U.S. production is lagging behind Canada. Leahy said syrup-making operations, once common in central Illinois, have all but dried-up, reasoning the labor-intensive process is a burden to commercial growers. It takes about 50 gallons of sap to produce one gallon of syrup.

Funk said it is worth the effort. "We sell out every year, usually by August or September," she said.

But with or without maple syrup, there is ample room for Illinois' farmers at the breakfast table. The primary ingredient in leading brands of pancake syrup like Mrs. Butterworth's is high fructose corn syrup. Illinois is second only to Iowa in corn production.

While Funk insisted there is no comparison between maple-flavored syrup and pure maple syrup, saying "often times, once people have tasted the real thing, they don't want to go back," she admitted it makes no difference to her what people pour on their waffles. "We also grow corn," Funk said. "We are corn and soybean growers."