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Trees in city parks off-limits for tapping

February 23, 2010

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Maple syrup from your backyard? It's not as far-fetched as it might sound.

A group that plucks ripe fruit from trees around the city now has its sights set on maple trees.

Not Far From The Tree wants Toronto homeowners to offer up five to 10 Norway maples for tapping, and hopes to collect the sap and boil it down into syrup for a community sugaring-off party.

But it doesn't actually matter if there's enough syrup for a pancake feast or just a mini-tasting.

"It's really not about getting a quantity, or getting as many trees as possible," says project coordinator Laura Reinsborough. "We want to do this as an opportunity to educate people about the urban forest."

Not Far From The Tree launched in 2007. Volunteers pick fruit from residential trees that would otherwise go to waste. The bounty is divided among tree owners, volunteers, food banks/shelters and chefs/restaurants.

In 2008, the group picked 1,362 kilograms of fruit in Toronto. Last year, volunteers picked 3,690 kilograms of sweet and sour cherries, serviceberries, mulberries, apricots, plums, crabapples, pears, sumac, elderberries, apples, black walnuts and ginkgo nuts.

Inspiration for the "We'd Tap That" project struck Reinsborough a year ago when she spotted buckets on a neighbour's tree and knocked on the door for a chat.

She knew about Canada's maple syrup industry, centred in Quebec and Ontario, but discovered micro maple syrup projects being attempted by citizens in Halifax, Brooklyn and the Boston area.

In Toronto, Reinsborough learned that the Humber Arboretum and Centre for Urban Ecology includes maple syrup harvesting in its March Break nature camp. Any private tapping being done in people's yards flies under the radar.

The City of Toronto's urban forestry department turns down requests to tap maple trees in city parks because it believes it is detrimental to the trees. It also regulates injury or removal of some privately owned trees.

Beth McEwen, the department's Forest and Natural Environment manager, believes backyard trees should not be tapped.

"We would not encourage it," she says.

McEwen says homeowners who want to "injure" a tree, usually during construction, excavations or pruning, usually file an application, pay a fee and get an arborist's report. She can't say whether that might be needed in this situation, but advised Not Far From The Tree to contact her department with details of their plan.

"I think we haven't really had a test of this in Toronto. It might depend on where the trees are located."

In Halifax last year, two residents who were tapping eight trees discovered they were breaking a bylaw preventing people from knowingly damaging trees. According to the CBC, the city chose to monitor the tapping instead of shutting it down.



Kortright Centre in Woodbridge has a maple syrup festival in March.

KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Tapping trees is "not a venture to be taken lightly," Reinsborough warns on the group's website, "as what we do directly impacts decades-old, living trees that make up our urban forest." She urges homeowners not to tap trees without "extensive research and proper training."

The syrup industry favours sugar maples, but in the city these trees are susceptible to urban stresses. Not Far From The Tree will tap only Norway maples, Reinsborough says, because they're perceived as abundant and invasive.

Mindful that urban trees face stresses like soil compaction from heavy traffic, dehydration from road salt and poor pruning, Not Far From The Tree will tap only the healthiest trees and won't consider anything that has been on industrial land.

Volunteers will drill one or two holes into each tree and insert spiles (tubes driven into drilled holes) for the sap to be extracted. The spiles will be removed before spring arrives, Reinsborough says, and the wounds will be sealed.

The group is using harvest and syrup preparation guidelines from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

"We hope to inspire more intimate connections between city-dwellers and the trees around them," Reinsborough writes on her website. "As they walk past a tree in the city, we hope that Torontonians who hear of what we're doing will gain a new awareness for the urban forest, based on a familiar connection to a beloved Canadian food."

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