

## Tapping Bigleaf Maple Demonstration Shows Positive Results

**Gary Backlund** and a small group of Vancouver Islanders have been working to lay the foundations for a commercial West Coast maple sap and syrup industry. With funding assistance provided by the **BC Agroforestry Industry Development Initiative**, the Backlunds demonstrated bigleaf maple tapping and syrup processing at commercial volumes and have provided information and training to many regional landowners. Now at the completion of this successful two-year project, the Agroforestry Initiative celebrates the positive results for agroforestry development on Vancouver Island and the genesis of a new industry that will continue to strengthen and diversify Vancouver Island's rural economy for years to come.

In the course of the project more than 4,400 litres of sap has been collected and processed into syrup as part of the goal to fine tune the production and processing details for this emerging industry. The processing equipment was made available to the public on a limited basis for the processing of an additional 1,500 litres of bigleaf maple sap.

The project website ([www.island.net/~maple](http://www.island.net/~maple)) has registered over 2,200 visitors and continues to generate numerous contacts from people interested in tapping. Media coverage has also generated many contacts. During the tapping season, the Backlunds averaged about three emails and at least one phone call per day regarding some aspect of maple sugaring or the project.

During the course of the demonstration, 12 presentations were given to a total of more than 400 people, 11 tours were provided to approximately 150 people, 8 workshops were held and an open house at *Backlund's Backwoods* was hosted. Presentations included:

- Ladysmith Rotary Club (March 25, 2004);
- Private Forest Landowners Association A.G.M. (June 2, 2004);
- Ladysmith Probus Club (October 20, 2004);
- Malaspina University-College, environmental students (November 26, 2004);
- Malaspina University-College, first-year forestry students (December 6, 2004);
- South Island Woodlot Association (January 16, 2005); and,
- Malaspina University-College, first-year horticulture students (January 12, 2005).

Tours included:

- Junior Forest Wardens, Powell River chapter (April 10, 2004);
- BCIT second-year forestry class (April 16, 2004);
- Malaspina University-College, environmental students (November 26, 2004);
- Malaspina University-College, first-year forestry students (December 6, 2004);
- Malaspina University-College, first-year horticulture students (January 12, 2005);
- South Island Woodlot Association, (January 16, 2005);
- Malaspina University-College, ESL students (January 24, 2005); and,
- Neck Point Scouts of Nanaimo (February 13, 2005).

The workshops were held at:

- Malaspina University-College, Cowichan campus on November 27, 2004;
- Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo campus on December 4, 2004;
- Malaspina University-College, Parksville campus on January 22, 2005;
- Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo campus on January 29, 2005; and,

- The Land Conservancy, Ladysmith on February 5, 2005.

The project has also had the involvement and visits from students and/or faculty from Malaspina University-College, the British Columbia Institute of Technology, Royal Roads University, University of Victoria, University of British Columbia, Langara College and the University of Alaska.

Displays for the project were set-up at three major community events on Vancouver Island. Tastes of bigleaf maple syrup were provided to over 1000 people. Ironically, although the Francophone Society in Nanaimo hosts an annual Maple Sugar Festival on Vancouver Island, the Backlunds were denied the opportunity to participate, as a major Eastern Canadian syrup manufacturer is the main sponsor of the festival and the Vancouver Island Maple Syrup Producers are considered competition.

Major newspaper and community television coverage was achieved including CBC Radio segments during both tapping seasons of the project and a feature story on a news program of CH television in Victoria. Many newspapers and community newsletters also ran stories. Gary Backlund's "how-to" book for West Coast maple sugaring and has sold over a 1000 copies.

A Vancouver Island maple email group was established with a distribution list of more than 100 individuals. Through the workshops and promotions the number of commercial evaporators active on Vancouver Island went from one at the beginning of the project to at least seven at the end, plus many homemade units. The number of people tapping on Vancouver Island and the amount of syrup made more than doubled each tapping season. Approximately 300 people were tapping on Vancouver this last season and that they harvested more than 10,000 litres of sap. At least five bigleaf maple syrup producers are selling syrup from the farm gates and at farmers' markets. Several others are using the product to enhance their Bed & Breakfast businesses. Buckerfield's Farm and Garden Supply, the largest farm supplier on the Island, now carries maple tapping supplies and old out and had to reorder at least once this last season. Dominion & Grimm syrup bottles are also now carried at an Island outlet.

The finished maple syrup has sold well at \$15 for 250 ml bottles and \$4 for 50 ml jars. In addition to the local markets, interest has come from several overseas exporters, high-end restaurants, and tourist gift outlets.

The quest to find indicators for choosing the best trees to tap has met with limited success; every rule seems to have exceptions. A general guideline points toward choosing open growing trees with vigorous growth. The research points away from choosing trees in dry sites. The presence of sapsucker holes almost always indicates a good tapping tree. An interesting footnote to tapping is that it was found that holes drilled when sap was running produced much more sap than holes drilled when sap didn't run for a few days. Later on when sap started running, these "dry" holes wouldn't produce, yet adjacent older holes in the same stem would.