



FRONTIER SUGARWORKS

Carrie Braman and VJ Guarino have enjoyed making maple syrup for many years. They make and sell certified organic maple syrup using sap from a 200-acre sugarbush they have leased from the state of Maine.

## Maple alchemy turns sap to gold

Hard work pays off on leased land

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS  
BDN STAFF

SANDY BAY TOWNSHIP — In the deep, remote forests that mark western Maine's Canadian border, two young farmers are using modern alchemy — the kind that consists of hard work, good trees, heat and time — to turn maple sap into gold.

For VJ Guarino and Carrie Braman of Frontier Sugarworks, the 200-acre sugarbush they're leasing from the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands (and the maple syrup they are making) is the culmination of years of work and dreams. The land is also where the husband and wife love to spend their time.

"We feel really lucky," said Braman, 34. "I have friends who like to go snowshoeing on the weekend. That's just our lives."

The teacher and freelance writer said that she first caught the maple syrup bug when she was a student at Vermont's Bennington College. There, she co-founded the school sugaring club, where members collected sap in buckets and boiled it into syrup over a campfire.

"I loved it," she said.

Guarino, 35, grew up in New Hampshire and worked for local sugarmakers when he was a student at Saint Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont. After Guarino and Braman met, they continued making maple syrup with a backyard-style hobby operation.

"We knew we wanted to go all-in at some point," she said. "Let's just do it if we can."

The chance to go for it came after they moved to Maine in 2009, when Braman got a teaching job at the Wayfinder School in Camden. They started looking everywhere to find land to start a sugaring operation, concentrating their search in the far west and far northern parts of Maine.

"That's the best land for maple," Braman said.

Their search for land happened at the same time that the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry launched a new maple leasing program as a way to assist Maine's maple producers, according to John Bott, spokesman for the department. Right now, the department has three sugarbush leases, all in the western region of the state.

According to the terms of Frontier Sugarworks' 20-year lease with the state, Guarino and Braman can have as many as 14,000 taps on the 200 acres of land. The other two leases are held by Jerome Frigon, who is allowed up to 20,000 taps on 314 acres, also in Sandy Bay Township, and Chris Botka, who is allowed 2,200 taps on 50 acres on Bald Mountain in Rangeley.

Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Commissioner Walt Whitcomb said that the state is interested in developing its maple syrup industry. Two years ago, Gov. Paul LePage said that Maine could be the national leader in making maple syrup because it has more maple trees than Vermont, which dominates the national maple landscape.

"If we decide to get organized, get more young people and develop the market ... Maine could do anything it wants," Kathryn Hop-  
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FRANK WERTHEIM

Mike Bendzela of Standish, a volunteer gardener with Maine Harvest for Hunger, holds up a heart-shaped potato harvested from his crop. Thanks to volunteers like Bendzela, Maine Harvest for Hunger donated more than 318,000 pounds of fresh produce to Maine food distribution sites last year.

## Harvest against hunger Maine growers join forces to combat food insecurity

BY JULIA BAYLY  
BDN STAFF

One of the things a Maine gardener likes more than gardening is sharing what comes out of that garden.

Thanks to a University of Maine Cooperative Extension program, thousands of pounds of that fresh produce is now finding its way into the hands and kitchens of some of the state's most needy residents.

For the last 15 years, Maine Harvest for Hunger has organized gardeners, farmers, businesses, schools and civic groups to grow and donate produce to food pantries, shelters and other food distribution points in the state.

Last year, according to the group, that meant more than 318,000 pounds of food went to 188 distribution centers and individuals with an estimated value of \$537,000.

"Maine Harvest for Hunger was born out of the realization of rising food insecurity among Maine's general population," said Frank Wertheim, associate professor with Maine Cooperative Extension in York County and director of the program. "We had this network of gardeners and volunteers in Maine who met with people at Good Shepherd [Food Bank of Maine] and other food pantries and asked what can we do to help with fresh produce."

Since the program began, it has provided close to 2.2 million pounds of food to people



CLARE COLE

University of Maine Cooperative Extension master gardener volunteers Dennis and Julia Violette work on the Rogers Farm in Old Town growing food for Maine Harvest for Hunger. Last year the farm donated more than 9,000 pounds of fresh produce to the program.

in Maine where the USDA estimates 16.2 percent of Maine households — more than 208,000 individuals — are food insecure.

A person is considered "food insecure" if they lack access to enough food to ensure adequate daily nutrition, according to the USDA.

Maine ranks first in New England and 12th in nation for food insecurity.

"One of the the things people on a tight budget deal with is they only have so much [money] for food and end up having to buy less expensive, less nutritious and highly processed food," Wertheim said. "We had the idea we could certainly make a difference in people's lives by getting farm or garden fresh food to them."

The program initially started out as a branch of Plant a Row for the Hungry, operated by the National Garden Writers Association but Wertheim said in 2008 it had transitioned into Maine Harvest for Hunger.

"Our initial thought was we would issue a challenge to the public and encourage home gardeners to get involved," he said. "But pretty soon one of our master gardeners got to talking to a farmer, and that farmer offered the produce that was left in his field at the end of the season to us."

Now volunteers in several Maine counties are regular visitors to farms where they are allowed to take or "glean" leftover crops that are distributed through Maine Harvest for Hunger.

"Some of the farmers started planting more just for us to glean," Wertheim said. "Others are more business-minded and call us only when they have the leftovers, [but] it is really important to build these relationships at the local level because there is no 'one size fits all' when you work with farmers and gardeners."

Now is the time for gardeners wanting to work with Maine Harvest for Hunger to start thinking about potential crops, said Katherine Garland, horticulturist with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension.

"Now is the time to be planning," she said. "It's the time we have conversations with the food distribution sites and  
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FRANK WERTHEIM

Fresh produce grown by gardening volunteers such as Zelda Kenney of South Berwick are donated to food distribution sites around the state through Maine Harvest for Hunger to help minimize food insecurity in Maine.



PETER COWIN

A honeybee collects pollen on a flower.

## Consumers make a beeline for Maine honey

Increased production part of nationwide trend

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE  
BDN STAFF

PORTLAND — Honey producers in Maine are cheering USDA news that production in the state is on the rise. According to recent figures from the National Agricultural Statistics Service, honey output increased 25 percent from 2014 statewide.

Ideal weather conditions, surging interest in backyard beekeeping, combined with greater awareness of the plight of the honeybee drove growth.

"The silver lining in the crisis is the media exposure to the difficulty and importance of honeybees to our ecosystem and economy," said Philip Gaven of The Honey Exchange in Portland. "That has led to the tripling in the number of caring and frequently well-educated beekeepers. This trend is nationwide, and it's very, very good news."

It also has led to higher prices for Maine's coveted raw, unfiltered honey. During last year's boom, honey prices increased 10 percent according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service. But customers at places such as The Honey Exchange are not balking. Far from it. They can't get their hands on the stuff fast enough.

"We are having trouble meeting demand in our store. Keeping honey stocked on our shelves has been a challenge," said Gaven.

Five years ago, Gaven and his wife, Meghan Gaven, set up a retail shop and beekeeping school in Portland's Deering neighborhood. Honey, beeswax candles and mead were top sellers, and it swiftly became a destination.

This spring, the couple will ramp up production of their line of raw, spiced honey. The spreads, which include flavors such as organic lemon, ginger and garam marsala, will soon be made in a commercial facility shared by Maine Mead Works in Portland. Meghan Gaven said stores across New England are clamoring for the value-add product.

**Honey's health benefits are vast. It's a solid source of natural energy, can soothe sore throats and ease allergies.**

"By making honey spreads with raw, unfiltered honey, we are giving customers a new, enjoyable treat while still providing all the benefits honey," she said.

Honey's health benefits are vast. It's a solid source of natural energy, can soothe sore throats and ease allergies. It also is a key element in the buy local, eat local movement. Still, even this innocent balm has been maligned.

"A couple of years ago there was a lengthy report about how American consumers were being hoodwinked by an international sleight-of-hand regarding imported 'honey' that was little more than flavored corn syrup," said Meghan Gaven. "As a honey store owner I can assure you that a lot of our customers were affected. With every report that reaches a new audience, the benefits of honey become slightly more mainstream and desirable."

The honey buzz is just getting louder. It is experiencing what Hampden's "Bee Whisperer," Bangor Daily News columnist Peter Cowin, calls "a positive feedback loop."

"Just as buying local produce is becoming more and more popular, purchasing local honey that's not processed and contains local pollens delivers health benefits and helps with allergies," he said.

Despite the upsides, and last year's increase, Maine is an unlikely  
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