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‘Maple season’ a sweet idea for local syrup producers

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Ontarians may soon be learning about a new season added to the year's calendar. Maple syrup producers are studying the idea of promoting a first season of the year to be called "maple season."

The idea was broached at the annual meeting of the Quinte Local, Ontario Maple Syrup Producers held recently in Warkworth.

With sugar bush activities for producers often starting early in February, numerous Shrove Tuesday pancake feasts usually with real maple syrup and two major maple syrup festivals in this part of Ontario, maple harvest and special events often run into early April, making the start-to-finish maple activities almost as long as a regular season. It is also a season which most people recognize automatically as a distinct time of year.

The two major festivals are the annual Warkworth Maple Syrup Festival, on the second weekend in March and Prince Edward County's Maple in the County, the last weekend in March.

When it comes to maple, it is very much a family concern for Ron and Janice Hubbs of the Carrying Place area. Ron has served several two-year terms as president of the local over the years, and at the annual meeting he was elected for yet another two-year term. And his predecessor was Janice who completed her first two-year term as president.

Other officers are Marc Curle of Campbellford as vice-president; Alice Potter of Warkworth as treasurer and Faith Osmond of Roseneath as secretary.

The local has "around 35 members" said Ron, and serves an area spanning roughly from Port Hope through Kingston, north to Peterborough and south through Prince Edward County. There are many more maple syrup producers in the area, he added, and many of them might stand to benefit if they joined and attended workshops and got first hand information on government assistance programs.

As an example, he cited the goal of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food to completely eliminate trace elements of lead in maple syrup. Much of this in past years has been traced to old-style evaporators which used lead solder. In recent months, the government created a financial assistance program to help producers convert to more modern boilers, or have evaporator seams replaced with non-lead solder.

Such programs are having good results, the meeting at Warkworth was told, with lead trace findings greatly reduced in recent years.

Membership and meetings are also opportunities to keep abreast of new technology. One of the newest ideas on the market are throw-away plastic spiles, said Ron. The idea is that re-used spiles can contain organisms that help the tree to heal quickly, requiring redrilling. The plastic ones are said to prevent that and are economical in price. There are also new styles of evaporators, designed to be more energy efficient.

Most people start in maple syrup production as a hobby, he said. After they have learned the ropes, many tend to expand. The industry considers any maple syrup operation with 1,000 or more taps as a working commercial producer.

Most area producers will be heavily involved in the coming maple syrup festivals, he said.

As for Janice, she is relieved to have more time for her position as curator of the Ameliasburgh Museum and for the family Sugar Shack business which specializes in maple and maple-flavoured food products.

Meanwhile, Ron says, some area producers are already working in their sugar bushes, setting plastic tube lines. Others are waiting for snow levels to drop some.

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