

Sweet study: Forest Area students tap maples with SEEDS

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FIFE LAKE — Pent up energy from a day of sitting in class filled the woods behind Forest Area middle and high school on Thursday afternoon.

Forest Area SEEDS site coordinator Joe Kreider led a group of seven students out into the wooded area that sprawls out from behind their school building. As the wind rustled the trees above, the students, ranging from fourth to eighth grade, set out to collect the buckets hanging from their tapped maple trees.

In the next couple days, Kreider will boil their last batch of sap, turning it into syrup.

SEEDS is a local nonprofit centered on ecology and education that works with more than 10 schools in northern Michigan through a grant from the Michigan Department of Education.

Since 2017, Forest Area middle school has hosted a SEEDS program in which students learn about the plants, water and animals that make up the forest behind their school. They test the water quality in the forest, track its wildflower growth and, when the winter weather turns just warm enough, Kreider leads the students through the process of making their own maple syrup.

Monday through Thursday, a group of students stay after school with Kreider and SEEDS support staff member Courtney Rogers. Between 3 and 6 p.m., the students enjoy snack time, recess, homework help, an ecological activity in the woods and a dinner courtesy of the school.

"It gets kids outside doing something that they're excited about. They've gotten really into this whole process and ... we can cover a lot of different subjects," Kreider said. "It's a fun activity that is very educational and very hands-on."

Students use math to measure the tree sizes and estimate how much syrup their sap collection will yield and learn the science behind how boiling the sap makes syrup. They also learn about the history of the area and of how maple sugaring was done by local Indigenous communities, Kreider said.

The students are involved in every step of the maple sugaring process, Kreider said. For fourth grader Maleah Brandt, picking which trees to tap was the best part. She even had a favorite tree of the 30 they tapped.

Seventh grader Dimitri Rivera said he liked collecting the sap the best. Fourth grader Ariella Rogers said boiling the sap was her favorite part.

"Because the smell," Rogers said. "It smells so good."

Ivan Hempton, an eighth grader at Forest Area, has been with the program since its beginning in 2017, when he was in fourth grade.

"It was just a fun experience. I got to do hands-on activities and just connect myself with nature," Hempton said. "Plus, it was something to do after school."

The end of maple sugaring season this year is especially sad for Hempton because this is his last year with the program, and there isn't an equivalent when he gets to high school. He's interested in the history of the land, however, and plans to continue studying that.

Now, as the season is winding down, the students in SEEDS are collecting their materials from the woods, boiling the sap and pouring the syrup into bottles adorned with labels designed by Hempton. This season, Kreider expects their sap collection to yield about four gallons of syrup. At the end of April, they'll celebrate their hard work with a pancake dinner shared between families and kids.

They plan to sell some of the syrup as well, Kreider said, and the proceeds from those sales will go back into the SEEDS program and specifically towards the shed that they use to store their maple sugaring materials. The shed was built in 2020 after a decades-old building for the same purpose was torn down. Now, they are hoping to install a chimney in it so they can boil the sap inside, Kreider said.

SEEDS also has a tree summer program for Forest Area students. In that program, they frequently go on field trips to places like Sleeping Bear Dunes and Michigan Legacy Art Park.

Forest Area Superintendent Joshua Rothwell said parents are “ecstatic” about the program. It keeps kids engrossed in the nature that surrounds their homes and gives parents a bit of reprieve in terms of childcare after school and in the summer, Rothwell said.

“This just gives them a couple more hours of education,” Rothwell said. “I think it’s more of an outdoor nature focus, which is good for kids because a lot of times they just don’t take advantage of what northern Michigan can give them with the outdoors.”

Source: https://www.record-eagle.com/news/sweet-study-forest-area-students-tap-maples-with-seeds/article_6a0cd52e-bce9-11ec-8401-5fab83d4e943.html