

Organic Maple Production – Marketing Opportunity or Road to Contempt, Stephen Childs, NYS Maple Specialist, Cornell Cooperative Extension

The making of maple syrup has long been regarded as a pure and natural process. As a result of this long standing view of maple production most producers feel that maple syrup is an organic product. Often maple producers seeking organic certification are looked on with contempt as someone thinking they're a little better than the rest of the producers, or trying to cast a negative view of non-organic syrup. After all, only a very tiny percentage of maple woodland is treated with any kind of pesticide and then only in emergency pest situations. Fertilizing maple sugar bushes is probably even more rare. With some extra paper work, a few minor changes, and some certification costs most maple producers could likely qualify as an organic operation.

For a maple producer marketing mostly near home to a rural population, being certified organic would likely be an extra headache with little benefit. After all many of the rural population have some sense of how maple syrup is made and have little concern with the safety and healthfulness of the products. For producers selling into suburban or urban settings or outside of the northeastern United States, the organic certification may just get a producer in the door of new markets and at favorable prices. Clearly many suburban, urban and customers outside of the northeast have little real understanding of what is involved in making maple syrup. The organic label seems to remove many concerns for them. I believe organic maple should be seen as positive for producers for these reasons. First, it can open maple markets with non-traditional customers here in the northeast. Second, it can open new distant markets outside the northeast. Third, it can improve the return to producers from those markets. I'm sure other states and Canada are seeking the best ways to access those markets as well, we shouldn't just hand them over because some prefer to have contempt for this organic idea. In fact, a few non-maple pancake syrups have already begun offering organic syrups made from organic corn.

What does a maple producer have to change to become organic? First, a producer must understand how the certification system works. The USDA has put together what is called the National Organic Standards. The USDA rules require that all producers and handlers that make an organic claim for their products must be certified by a USDA accredited certification organization. The only exceptions are for farmers with less than \$5,000 in gross organic sales and retailers that do not process food. These small organic producers can sell product as organic but not certified organic and their products cannot become a component of a certified organic processed food. These small operations must also follow the rules and keep the records required of certified farms. The USDA has approved about 100 businesses and Associations to be organic certification agencies at this time. A maple producer can use any of these approved certification agencies that certify maple production. The most local USDA accredited certifying organization would be NOFA – New York. To take a look at the NOFA guidance to maple production, check out:  
<http://nofany.org/certification/organiccertificationguidancemanual.htm#MapleSyrup>.

To be a certified organic producer a maple producer would need to adhere to these key points:

- Become a member or client of a USDA accredited certifying organization. The list is available at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/CertifyingAgents/Accredited.html>
- Working with that certification organization put together an Organic System Plan for your farm.
- Abide by the Production and Handling Standards
- Use only approved substances as listed by the Organic Materials Review Institute.
- Be inspected by the certification organization.
- Pay member and certification fees. These vary with different certifying organizations and the size of your operation.

The Organic System Plan is set by the certification organization and tailored to the individual operation. The plan would include a description of all woods and sugarhouse practices including how often various practices happened. It would include a list of all substances used. A plan for monitoring of management practices and a description of the record keeping system is necessary. Record keeping would include such things as woods activities and history, sap harvest and processing times, cleaning and sanitizing of equipment, syrup storage and sales records.

There are no federal standards for organic sugar bush management or maple syrup processing. Producers and certifiers must take what is available in the National Organic Program Final Rule for crop production and processing and apply it to maple syrup production to develop the Organic System Plan. I checked with a couple of USDA accredited certifying organizations that certify maple producers to see what the rules of production would look like. Though the rules vary with different certifiers, my impression is that most maple producers would only need to make minor modifications to their production practices to be in compliance. A few areas of change might include the use of organic certified de-foamers and equipment cleaners. One certifier did not allow the use of UV for sap treatment or galvanized sap buckets but others did. There were restrictions on the number of taps per tree and sizes of trees but these were in line with the general recommendations. In all cases the woods must have had no un-approved pesticide used for three years prior to certification. Water used in the business would need to be tested. The biggest issues to becoming Certified Organic would be selecting a USDA accredited certifying organization, putting together the Organic System Plan and then living up to that plan and keeping the necessary records.

The cost to certify your operation verses the benefit to your income and marketing needs is where the decision to participate should rest. Realize that being organic could build consumer confidence into a whole new group of clients. I suggest producers abandon the contempt for organic and encourage quality marketing and client building on every possible front.