

Birch Tree Syrup Competes With Maple

Birch tree syrup is a hot commodity that's attracting a lot of interest, and Joe Glaves of Cumberland House, Sask., is working hard to promote the relatively unknown product.

As a member of a newly-formed "natural syrups" cooperative, Glaves started collecting sap from birch trees in 1998. He now does a brisk domestic and international business through mail order sales and also retail at his restaurant and grocery store. Besides birch syrup and sauce, he also produces box elder syrup and "birch/elder garlic" sauce.

He can sell all the birch syrup he can produce, which is between 50 and 75 gallons per year. It retails for \$5 per 2-oz. bottle and wholesales for about \$38 per quart to other restaurant chefs.

"It's well-known in Eastern Europe and Asia as an energizer, and Canadian aboriginals used it in the spring for the same reason," Glaves explains. "Alaska already has a well-developed birch syrup industry."

He has invested \$100,000 in reverse osmosis and evaporator equipment which he uses to remove 70 percent of the water from the sap while cooking it. The processing takes place in vats located in a small shed and can be done at a rate of about 90 gallons per hour.

For every 24 gal. of birch sap, Glaves can make one quart of syrup. This compares to the maple syrup ratio of 10 to one.

He and five full-time employees collect the sap when it is running during a three



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week period starting in mid-April, and it is a round-the-clock, 7-day a week job during this time. They drill 7/16-in. holes (1.25-in. deep) into about 2,200 trees (minimum tree dia. is 8 in.), and insert a plastic tap in each hole from which plastic buckets are hung. An employee on an ATV pulling a large tank collects the sap for transport back to the processing shack.

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Exciting New "Ball Ride"

Remember how much fun it was to roll down a hill when you were a kid? You can have the same kind of fun and more with the "Zorb" - a giant clear beach ball that you can ride in.

It's catching on fast in New Zealand, where it was invented, and might be a great way to draw attention to a farm-based corn maze or pick-your-own operation.

The Zorb is 11 ft. in dia. and weighs 200 lbs. It's made from double skinned transparent plastic.

You can't just buy a Zorb. It's set up as a business, much like bungee jumping. According to Allen Skinn, the U.S. representative who's been Zorbing in New Zealand, there are liability issues when you're strapped inside a smaller ball that's suspended inside a larger one with thousands of nylon strands and about two ft. of air between the two. "You reach speeds of up to 23 mph on a 15 degree slope," he says. "If some kids took it and went on a 45 degree sloped hill and went a quarter of a mile, they'd be going 50 mph. The problem is that the Zorb becomes airborne and bounces at about 35 or 36 mph. It makes for an extreme ride that's cool to look at but the person inside gets beaten up pretty badly."

Because the Zorb is so new to the U.S., Skinn says he's looking for partners who



There's a smaller ball inside a larger ball, with thousands of nylon strands and about 2 ft. of air between the two. "You reach speeds of up to 23 mph on a 15 degree slope," says Allen Skinn. Rides sell for about \$25 apiece.

have land with a suitable hill in a high tourist area. "Ideally, we'd also prefer that potential partners would be able to fund the development of the site," he says.

If those individuals have the land, then typically the costs would run around \$200,000 to develop the site.

Rides generally sell for \$25 apiece. Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Zorb USA, 9400 Big View Drive, Suite 201, Austin, Texas 78730 (ph 512 342-9221; usa@zorb.com; www.zorb.com).

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Walking Stick Hobby Grew Into Business

Brothers Ken and John Laninga of Western Alberta make diamond willow walking sticks and sell them all over the world through the internet.

Diamond willow is a popular woodworking material because each piece is unique and interesting, while at the same time, strong. The dark brown diamonds on the sticks contrast beautifully with the stark white willow wood.

John is a bison rancher and Ken is a retired accountant, but both spend much of their spare time in the bush, collecting specimens that they later make into sticks, canes, stair rails, lamps and coffee cup holders. Bigger ones work well for light posts, signposts and mailbox posts.

The Laningas sell most of their walking sticks to Americans, but have had many international orders in addition to supplying Peace River, Alta. area tourist shops.

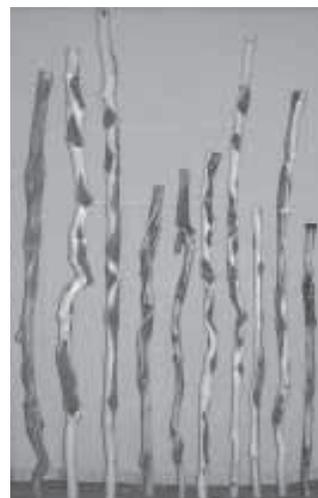
They started their sideline business as a hobby in 1994 and get much enjoyment from walking through the swamps on their property, in search of extra-fancy diamond willow branches.

"I only cut live ones between May 15 and July 15 because during that period, the sap is running and they are very easy to peel. Other times of the year, I mark the green ones with ribbons, to collect later," Ken explains.

The Laningas say they find the best diamond willow trees near beaver dams and other wet areas. It has taken them years of experience to judge tree limbs for their potential as walking sticks, given that they are usually disguised with bark, lichen or vines.

After skinning bark from the sticks, they dip the ends in melted wax to help prevent cracking. Next, they dry the green, peeled sticks for about a year by laying them on a rack at the back of their shop.

Then they sand the bark out of the diamond indentations using a "Flex Drum Sander" (a brand they highly recommend), before finely sanding the rest of the stick. They also drill a



Finished, low-end sticks sell for \$20 and have 8 to 10 diamonds. Larger, fancier sticks sell for more than \$85 each.

hole at the top for a cord handle. They coat the sticks with up to three layers of Varathane, and price them based on their size and the number of diamond shapes they have.

Finished, low-end sticks sell for \$20 (Can.), and have 8 to 10 diamonds. Some of the larger, fancier sticks sell for more than \$85 each. The quality and number of diamonds and twists is what determines the stick price, rather than size.

About 90 percent of the sticks the brothers sell are unfinished ones, for people who want to do the work themselves, which often includes carving.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Ken Laninga, 9705 - 88 Ave., Grande Prairie, Alta., Canada T8V0B6 (ph 780 532-3077; stixsite@telus.net; www.sticksite.com) or John Laninga (bison3@telus.net).

Farmer Charges Rural "Tourists" To Torch His Prairie Grass

One man's chore is another man's fun. Jan Jantzen of Emporia, Kansas charges "amateur pyromaniacs" \$100 each year to help him burn off the prairie grass on his farm. He calls the event "Flames in the Flint Hills."

Each year, Jantzen uses fire to renew the grass and kill off invasive plants. For him, it's dirty, smoky and dangerous work. For people who come out from the city, it's great fun.

He came up with the idea for "burn tourism" one year after telling horse-riding customers that the entire riding area would soon be in flames. Some mentioned wanting to see that.

To test the market, he sent out fliers that

brought 15 people to "Feel the heat, hear the crackle, smell the smoke, and witness the leaping flames, all as close as you want to be."

People pay to set the blaze and enjoy snacks, a cash bar and dinner with a live bluegrass band afterwards.

Jantzen's aware that it's dangerous. With winds gusting at more than 20 mph this year, he warned guests that it's not safe. He reminded them that a range fire can outrun a person. If the fire turns the wrong way, he warns them to think "black or blue" which means to run for black, burned ground or blue water. *Excerpted from the Wall Street Journal*