

Brightwood's Maples



Photo courtesy of Chuan-Chu Chou

Does this red leaf look familiar?

Hint: This classic leaf shape adorns the Canadian flag and a National Hockey League team's jerseys.

Yes... It is a sugar maple! Brightwood Park is home to many of these native trees that give us such brilliant Fall foliage.

In case you did not know, sugar maples are highly valued from an ecological perspective. Like the mighty oak, these trees support birds, wildlife, and other insects that call the park home. Its buds and twigs are food for deer and rabbits. Squirrels and chipmunks munch on its seeds (called samara). Birds and small mammals dwell in nests built among its branches and make their homes in its cavities.

Of course, sugar maples are also highly valued by humans! Native Americans harvested maple sap to use as a sweetener. They used it fresh or fermented it as a beverage and also used it for cooking. Early settlers to America also appreciated the sweet water sap.

In late winter to spring, during freeze and thaw cycles, the tree's sweet water sap begins to flow. It is basically ground water that pulls sweetness and nutrients from the tree. A single tree can produce up to 60 gallons a day of this clear liquid. Our maple syrup comes from sweet water that is cooked down and condensed. It takes about 30 to 50 gallons of sweet water to make 1 gallon of syrup. If done properly, harvesting sweet water from a sugar maple tree does it no harm.

Sugar maples are so valued that a number of States have named them their State Tree: New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Maple syrup is such a significant crop in Canada that the maple leaf adorns its flag and is its national emblem.

There is concern that climate change may threaten sugar maple trees in the future. States where maple products are a significant commodity have begun to look into the impact of climate change on this crop. Warming winters are causing the maple sugaring season to move earlier to align with freeze/thaw cycles. There is discussion of potential impact from decreased snow packs and drought conditions that may cause damage to root systems and sprouting trees.