ARE YOU CONSIDERING A MAPLE SYRUP BUSINESS?

Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development

Whether you've tapped a few trees with buckets or are seeing the opportunity in the maple syrup market, starting a maple syrup business requires creating a business plan to meet your goals. Deciding on the size of your maple business, understanding how much investment of both time and money, obeying regulations, and thinking through your sales channels are important to the success of your maple business.

Do you have the trees needed?

The size, species, and accessibility of your maple trees set a limit on the size of your maple business. The maples should be close together to keep the tubing and maintenance cost low.

Sugar maples and black maples have a higher sugar content, requiring as little as 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. Red maples and silver maples have a lower sugar content, or brix, and often 60 gallons of sap are needed to produce 1 gallon of syrup.

What regulations affect different scales of syrup production?

Most beginning producers with fewer than 500 taps will use the home-based processing certification, but they should consider setting up the sugar shack to be ready for commercial kitchen certification.

Home-based processing: If maple syrup producers are harvesting their sap, they can sell under the home-based processor regulation in Kentucky. The sales must be under $60,000 and all direct to your consumer. To become a home-based processor, you must submit an application and $50 registration fee to the Kentucky Food Safety Branch. With this certification, you can sell syrup at a farmers market, from a certified roadside stand, or in-person in Kentucky.

Commercial Kitchens: For those wanting to sell more than $60,000 in home-based products, sell online or get into wholesale markets, they will need to build or rent facilities that are inspected as a commercial kitchen. Often, those who have constructed dedicated sugar shacks are also having their facilities inspected as commercial kitchens to increase the ways and places they can sell maple syrup. The Kentucky Food Safety Branch will work with producers to review plans for processing facilities to create appropriate processing space for maple syrup.

How much time can you spare?

Tapping trees, maintaining tubing, and collecting sap are part of the work. In November or December every year, taps must be set and tubing maintained and updated. Plan for at least a couple of weekends of work to install taps, maintain tubing, and clean the tubing annually. Smaller producers may remove and clean the tubing each year, then reinstall. Many choose to leave it up and use a cleaning solution to clean it in place before installing new taps, which saves time.

Sap must be processed or frozen within a week of collection, requiring long hours boiling and evaporating sap into syrup. Boiling and evaporating the sap takes continuous work during maple season, even with mechanical help from a reverse osmosis machine.

Who do I call to get started?

The **Kentucky Maple Syrup Association** provides training and peer-to-peer support. The KMSA supports the annual KY Maple Syrup Day and hosts an annual maple school for Kentucky producers. http://kymaplesyrup.com

The **University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension** supports agriculture, including developing educational materials and supporting farmer groups. County extension agents can connect with specialists to help with maple syrup production. https://ky-maplesyrup.ca.uky.edu/

The **Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development** (KCARD) works with agricultural businesses, including maple syrup producers. They develop financial projections and business plans based on your goals and resources available. www.kcard.info

The **Kentucky Department of Agriculture** can help connect to different opportunities, including cost-shares for marketing materials and can help navigate farmers market regulations. https://www.kyagr.com/

The **Kentucky Division of Forestry** has the Forest Stewardship Program, which works with landowners to create a forest management plan based on their goals for their forestland. https://eec.ky.gov/Natural-Resources/Forestry/Pages/default.aspx

The **Kentucky Woodland Owners Association** provides members access to education and resources other woodland owners have used to improve the quality and management of their forests. https://www.kwoa.net/

How much will it cost?

Producers with fewer than 100 taps can reasonably expect to need $7,500 in start-up costs for tubing and equipment, including an evaporator but no separate sugar shack.

Up to 500 taps can expect an investment of around $25,000. This includes a reverse osmosis machine, a larger evaporator, filtering equipment, tubing, tabs, and a sugar shack.

For those looking to go to 1,000 taps, the investment would be around $72,000. This includes a side-by-side vehicle for pulling tanks and tubing maintenance, a commercial kitchen in the sugar shack, maple processing equipment, and bottling equipment.

Funding Resources

The **Kentucky State University Small-Scale Farm Grant** can help purchase equipment, up to $5,000. https://www.kysu.edu/academics/college-acs/school-of-ace/co-op/small-scale-farm-grant-program.php

The **County Agricultural Investment Program (CAIP)**, can help pay for supplies related to new farm-based pursuits, including tubing, taps, and other supplies. https://www.kyagr.com/agpolicy/Kentucky-Agricultural-Development-Fund-Applicants.html

The **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** provides cost-share for improving forest stands, including the removal of invasive species. Additionally, it can provide cost-share for an energy audit and assistance for making energy-efficient upgrades for evaporating syrup. https://www.nrcs.usda.gov

The **Farm Service Agency (FSA)** provides microloans to farmers to start or enlarge their maple syrup operations by providing up to $50,000. The terms are more favorable than conventional business loans. https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/farm-loan-programs/microloans/index

For producers in eastern Kentucky, the **SOAR Small Scale Farm Loan** through Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation (KHIC) can provide up to $7,500 at an interest rate of 1% with a simple loan application. http://www.soarfarmloans.org/