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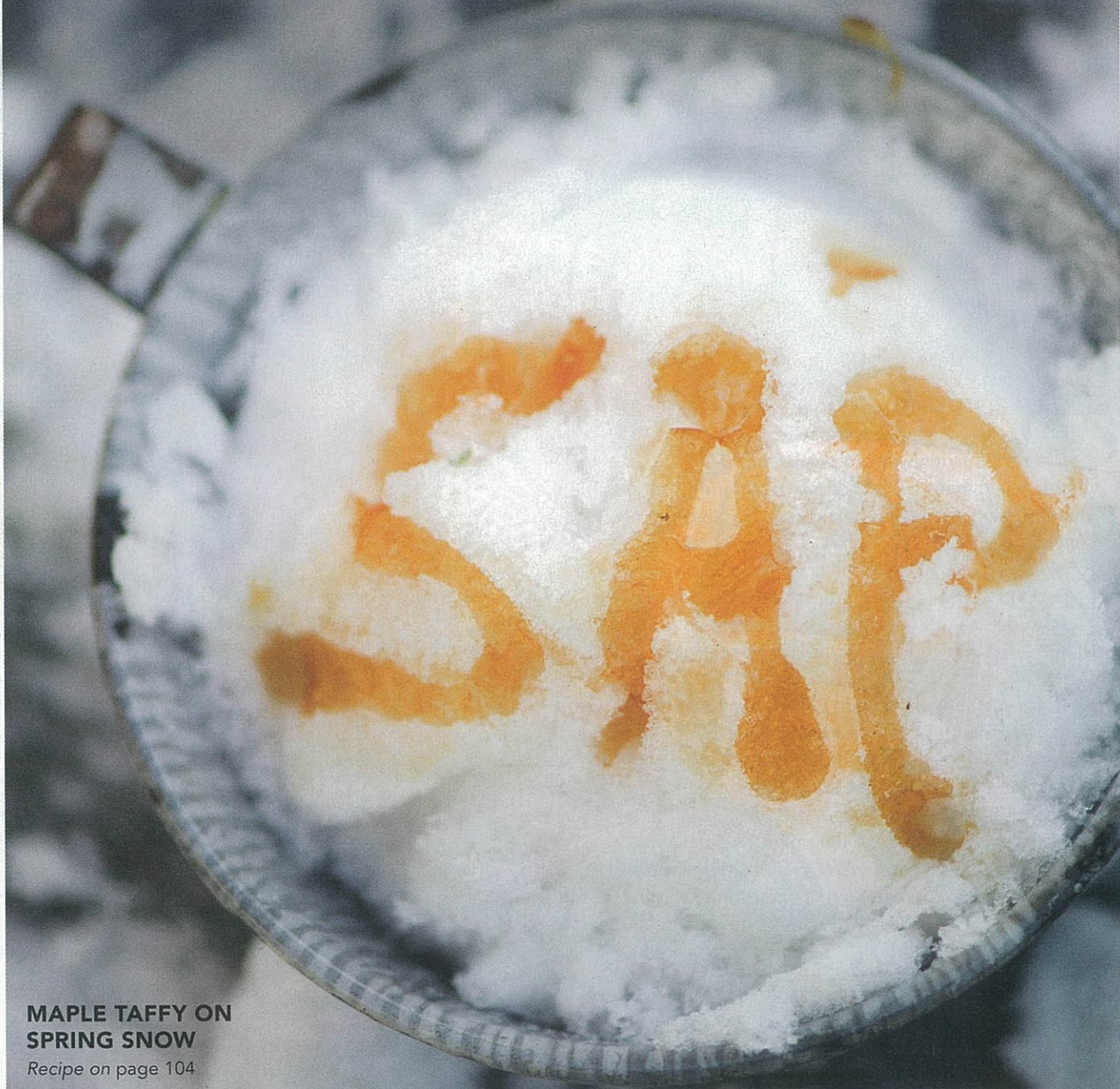
JOIN A
**WILDFLOWER
RESCUE** PAGE 61



WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY TOVAH MARTIN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KINDRA CLINEFF

how *sweet* it is

Three hundred taps and growing, Dirt Road Farm goes for a cold crop. While other farmers might be hibernating, Mike and Phoebe Smith are going full boil. Talk about a sappy love affair.



**MAPLE TAFFY ON
SPRING SNOW**

Recipe on page 104

OPPOSITE: Freshly fallen clean snow at Dirt Road Farm in Connecticut is dribbled with hot reduced maple syrup. **THIS PHOTO:** Neighbor Billy's sweet reward for helping tap the maple trees is a bowlful of maple taffy.



The early morning sun is just peeking through the naked tree branches to glisten on the snow sugarcoating the ground. At 25°F, the air has a snap, but nonetheless, Phoebe and Mike Smith, accompanied by Dixie, their Jack Russell Terrier, are bustling around in down vests. At Dirt Road Farm in Weston, Connecticut, smoke is already billowing from the sugar shack, Mike is minding the fire, and Phoebe is heading off to visit each of the 300 sugar maple trees dotting the 6-acre farm.



The month is March, the weather is predicted to go just above freezing today and plummet into the low 20s again tonight, but these farmers couldn't be happier. The Smiths are likely the only family in town hoping those bone-chilly temperatures keep right on happening.

Mike Smith grew up in frigid upper New York and managed NHL ice hockey teams. Phoebe Cole-Smith spent her childhood in equally chilly Illinois before attending school in Vermont. That might explain why this couple warmly embrace outdoor winter activities. Seven years ago, when Phoebe was casting around for a Christmas gift for Mike, she stumbled upon a maple syrup-making kit at tapmytrees.com and figured it might make the

perfect present for her thermal-insulated husband. In retrospect, there are moments when Phoebe wonders about the wisdom of that "great idea."

The kit came with three buckets, three spiles, a 7/16-inch drill bit, and instructions. But that was just the beginning, because the following year Mike bought additional supplies and geared up to 25 taps. The fact that the Smiths' property is densely populated by a mature stand of sugar maple trees (*Acer saccharum*) was an incentive to keep expanding. Rumor has it that roughly 150 years ago, the property's farming family planted a sugar maple for every child born. Apparently, they had a large family, because many trees in residence now have the 24-inch circumference necessary to support

ABOVE LEFT: Phoebe and Mike Smith take a break with Jack Russell Dixie by the sugar shed built of red cedar in 2015. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Dirt Road Farm is switching to stainless-steel buckets, but they still have some vintage metal versions marked with their initials—each is sanitized and covered to keep the sap clean. **OPPOSITE:** Parsnips turn scrumptious when baked into a moist, spicy cake topped in oats and pecans and drizzled with maple syrup glaze.



**MAPLE-PARSNIP COFFEE
CAKE WITH NUTTY OAT
TOPPING AND MAPLE GLAZE**

Recipe on page 104




three taps, which is the maximum tap load a tree can safely shoulder.

The bounty of senior trees is a plus because only mature maples need apply for the job. The trunk of a sugar maple should be at least 12 inches in diameter to be tapable, and during a good flow, an inserted spile will drip approximately 1½ gallons of sap daily. At 18 inches, the tree can support two taps, and even if a tree trunk exceeds 24 inches around, three taps is the limit. Because of the high sugar content of their sap, Mike focuses solely on sugar maples. And he is a stickler for tapping with buckets. “When you tap rather than using tubing, you get to know your trees intimately,” says the unabashed sugar maple-hugger. That intimacy translates into a whole lot of lugging, a chore that is partly shouldered by fellow maple syrup connoisseur Ryan Tsujikawa. Thanks to the crew, Dirt Road Farm is now up to 300 taps, with plans to expand to (and max out at) 350 next year. Meanwhile, the property has been upgraded to earn its official farm designation, which requires a 10-year commitment.

After collecting the sap, it's time for the fun part. Sap is 98 percent water and must be boiled to safely rid it of bacteria and produce maple syrup.

(To eliminate any bacteria, bring sap to a full boil and then boil for at least a minute.) For maple syrup purposes, collected sap should be boiled immediately or stored at 38°F or colder (the Smiths try to boil their sap within 24 hours of harvest). Reaching the 61 degrees Brix (sugar content measured with a hydrometer) that qualifies sap to be technically called maple syrup takes hours of boiling. Boiling sap indoors is not recommended because of possible damage to furnishings from the lengthy evaporation process, so making maple syrup is traditionally an outdoor, cold-season activity. Approximately 40–45 gallons of sap must be brought to a boil and evaporated to produce 1 gallon of syrup. However, turning out a quart or two of maple syrup is a much easier process that requires merely a fire pit (check tapmytrees.com for information on safely fitting up an appropriate fire pit), some buckets with lids, constant vigilance, and a whole lot of patience.

The rewards are savory. For the Smiths, that's where Phoebe comes into the process, dreaming up recipes. Hosting barn suppers, Dirt Road Farm serves up the essence of New England winter throughout the year. From start to delectable finish, it's a sweet experience. 

ABOVE: Mike custom-designed his 16x20-foot saltbox sugar shed with sliding barn doors on both ends. The cupola was engineered so it has sufficient draft to allow the steam to escape during sugaring (this is crucial). Ryan Tsujikawa totes armloads of split wood to be burned for the evaporator. Every year, the maple syrup operation burns through eight cords of split wood, which Mike starts splitting mid-autumn to be prepared when the sap starts flowing in spring.



VANILLA BEAN MACARONS WITH SALTED MAPLE-PECAN BUTTERCREAM FILLING
Recipe on page 104

TOP LEFT: Brothers Billy (left) and Eddie bundle up and lift the sap bucket lids, checking to make sure the sweet sap is flowing properly. The volume of sap produced during a single season varies between 10 and 20 gallons, depending on the tree, weather conditions, and length of the sap season. **ABOVE LEFT:** Every bottle is stamped with a bottling date on the seal, but Mike can tell roughly when the sap was harvested. “The color changes through the season; later harvests are usually darker,” he says. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Phoebe's featherlight vanilla bean macarons with their salty maple-pecan filling melt in your mouth.



SUGAR MAPLE AT A GLANCE

BOTANICAL NAME:

Acer saccharum

DIMENSIONS: 60–75 feet

tall, 40–50 feet wide; trunk must be at least 12 inches in diameter for tapping.

HARDINESS: Zones 3–8

CONDITIONS: Good light, tolerates less-than-ideal conditions. Disease-resistant.

PLANTING: At least 15 feet apart for tapping.

WATERING: Even moisture.

FLOWERS: Lacy, dangling, greenish-yellow blooms before leaves appear in spring followed by winged samaras (seedpods).

AUTUMN COLOR:

Superlative red, orange, and yellow leaves—best maple for fall color.

YEARS TO MATURITY FOR TAPPING: At least 25 years to become 12 inches in diameter.

WINTER IDENTIFICATION: At maturity, the bark becomes furrowed and flaky, peeling in vertical plates.

SAP: At 2.0, the sugar content of sugar maple sap is the highest of any maple.

MAPLE TAFFY ON SPRING SNOW

1. Gather clean, fresh snow and place it in a glass baking dish on a baking sheet. Pack it down to a thickness of about 3 inches with your (clean!) hands if it is especially fluffy.
 2. If necessary, keep the snow frozen in your freezer until ready to use.
 3. Place 1 cup of dark amber maple syrup in a small saucepan and boil until it reaches the soft-ball stage on a candy thermometer (235°F). Remove from heat and place in a heatproof pitcher or bowl. Immediately pour or spoon the syrup onto the snow in the baking dish. Let cool for a few moments, then enjoy.
- NOTE:** Children enjoy stretching and playing with the slightly cooled taffy with their (clean!) hands before eating.

MAPLE-PARSNIP COFFEE CAKE WITH NUTTY OAT TOPPING AND MAPLE GLAZE

FOR THE CAKE:

- 1¾ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. ground cinnamon
- ½ tsp. freshly grated nutmeg
- 1¼ cups pureed cooked parsnip (peeled, chopped into large chunks, boiled until tender, and pureed until smooth, adding water a few drops at a time if too thick)
- 1 cup pure dark amber maple syrup
- 5 Tbsp. unsalted butter, melted
- 2 Tbsp. organic safflower oil
- 1½ tsp. vanilla extract
- 2 large eggs

FOR THE TOPPING:

- ¾ cup chopped pecans
- ½ cup old-fashioned rolled oats
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 2 Tbsp. sweet unsalted butter, softened
- 3 Tbsp. pure dark amber or dark maple syrup
- ½ tsp. ground ginger
- ⅛ tsp. sea salt

FOR THE GLAZE:

- 1¼ cups powdered sugar
- ½ cup pure maple syrup
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Butter and flour a 10-inch springform pan or a fluted tube pan.
2. For the cake, in a medium bowl whisk together the first five ingredients (through nutmeg).
3. In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the pureed parsnip, maple syrup, melted butter, oil, and vanilla on medium speed until smooth. Add the eggs, one at a time, thoroughly mixing after each addition. Add the dry ingredients to the parsnip-maple mixture and mix on slow speed until just combined. Pour the batter into the prepared cake pan, smoothing the top with a rubber spatula.
4. For the topping, in a small mixing bowl combine all the topping ingredients using a wooden spoon, mixing until small crumbs are formed. Use your hands to break up any larger lumps if necessary.
5. Sprinkle the topping evenly over the cake batter in the pan. Bake the cake for 45 to 50 minutes, until the center is just set. Do not overbake; a cake tester inserted into the center should retain moist crumbs. Let the cake cool for 20 minutes on a wire rack set over a half sheet pan before removing the sides of the pan.
6. While the cake is in the oven, make the glaze. Combine all the ingredients, and whisk until smooth.
7. Once the cake has cooled for 20 minutes but is still slightly warm, drizzle the glaze over the top of the cake and let it run down the sides. Serve immediately.

VANILLA BEAN MACARONS WITH SALTED MAPLE-PECAN BUTTERCREAM FILLING

Makes about 28 macarons.

FOR THE VANILLA BEAN MACARONS:

- 1½ cups blanched whole or sliced almonds
- 1¾ cups powdered sugar

- ½ cup egg whites (aged overnight if possible)
- 1⅛ Tbsp. granulated sugar
- Seeds from half a vanilla bean
- Pinch of sea salt

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Place almonds in a food processor; process until as fine as possible. Add powdered sugar and process until well-combined and very fine.
2. In the bowl of an electric stand mixer whisk egg whites and granulated sugar together for 2 minutes on medium speed. Increase speed to medium-high and whisk for 2 additional minutes. Then whisk on high for 2 minutes more. The egg whites should hold stiff, glossy peaks when you lift the whisk out of the bowl.
3. Add the vanilla bean seeds and beat on high speed for 30 seconds. Add the almond mixture and sea salt all at once. Fold by hand with a spatula from bottom of bowl upward, then press flat side of spatula firmly through middle of mixture. Repeat just until batter flows like molten lava, about 35 full strokes.
4. Line two heavy baking sheets with parchment paper. Fill a pastry bag with the batter. Using a ⅜-inch tip, pipe out ¾-inch rounds of batter, spaced 1 inch apart, swirling tip off to one side so the batter does not peak. After filling baking sheets with piped rounds, tap the sheets firmly against counter two or three times to release air bubbles.
5. Position an oven rack in the lower third of the oven. Bake macarons, one sheet at a time, rotating halfway through, until they are risen and just set, about 13 minutes. Let cool.

FOR THE SALTED MAPLE-PECAN BUTTERCREAM FILLING:

- 1¼ cups dark amber (formerly Grade B) maple syrup
- ½ cup plus 1 Tbsp. egg whites
- ¼ tsp. sea salt
- 2 sticks unsalted cultured pasture butter, cut into 1-inch cubes
- ¾ cup pecans, lightly toasted and finely chopped (plus more for rolling finished macarons)

1. In a medium-size saucepan bring the maple syrup to a boil over medium-high heat (use a medium-size pan as the syrup will rise). Cook until the mixture reaches the soft-ball stage (238–240°F on a candy thermometer).
2. While the maple syrup is cooking, in the bowl of a stand mixer whisk the egg whites and a pinch of salt on medium speed until the egg whites form medium-firm peaks, about 3 minutes.
3. When the maple syrup reaches 238°F, remove from heat and gradually and steadily pour it down the side of the mixer bowl, resting the edge of the pan on the bowl so the syrup does not hit the whisk attachment and splatter. Whisk the meringue until stiff peaks form and the bowl feels just warm (not hot) to the touch, about 8 minutes.
4. Swap out the whisk attachment for the beater. Beat on medium-high speed, adding the salt and the butter, piece by piece, until incorporated and fluffy. (Note: Start with ¼ teaspoon salt, adding more to taste.) When the beater begins to make a slapping sound, the buttercream is done.
5. Gently fold in about half of the finely chopped pecans (save the rest for assembling the cookies) until thoroughly mixed but not deflated. The buttercream can be covered and refrigerated for up to 2 weeks.

FOR THE FINISHED MACARONS:

1. Pipe or spread Salted Maple-Pecan Buttercream Filling onto flat sides of half the macarons; top with the remaining half.
2. Roll the edges of each macaron in the remaining finely chopped pecans so they adhere to the exposed filling as a pretty and tasty garnish. Wrap macarons in plastic wrap and refrigerate.

For more information, see Resources on page 111.

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DEADLINE

Submissions must be received by September 30, 2017. Award winners will be selected by *Country Gardens* editors to be featured in a future issue.

WHAT TO SEND

Send us your name, address, and telephone number, as well as color photographs, color printouts, or digital photos of your garden, a rough landscape plan, and a brief description of your garden or garden room.

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