

GROW-ZONE

A Quarterly Journal Review of our Seasons

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Sugar Maples

The Sugar Maple tree (*Acer saccharum*) is rightly named for the high sugar content found in its sap. While most tree species contain 1-2% sugar in their sap, the Sugar Maple contains 3-4%. In February and March, freezing and thawing happens almost daily here in Wisconsin. This consistent pressure fluctuation signals the tree to send sap from its root reserves to its branches to begin forming new leaf buds. By tapping the tree, we can take a little off the top to boil down into maple syrup, which we use in our farm recipes.



2024 Maple Syrup Season

This maple syrup season was a quick one! Due to the unusually warm temperatures that we experienced in February, we were able to tap and harvest sap earlier than normal. By February 12th, we had tapped 10 Sugar Maple trees in the Bear Woods forested area of the property. We were able to boil down enough sap for about three gallons of syrup in the end! (see photo to the right)

The collected sap must have the excess water removed to create syrup. We use a reverse osmosis system, by which the sap is pumped through a series of barrels. (above, top left photo) We continue boiling the sap in our evaporator (above, lower left photo) until we are left with finished maple syrup at a 66% sugar content.

Trees begin healing the holes bored through their bark after about three weeks. Since we already had enough syrup for our annual recipes, we decided to give these trees a break and let them heal up, calling it a season by the 28th of February!



New Plantings, Indoors and Out!

Every year, around the first week of February, the greenhouse begins bustling with our garden staff who are eager to sow their yearly seeds or begin propagating fresh plantings. The photo on the right gives you an idea of how FULL our greenhouses get at this time of the year!

By starting many of our plants from seed inside the greenhouse, our growing season is extended by a few weeks! This gives our plants extra time to develop their root systems and acclimate before being planted in our raised-bed gardens or in-ground flower beds. Some of the plants we started in the greenhouse this year include sunflowers, nasturtiums and pumpkins!



Ginkgo Sanctuary

One of the latest additions to the gardens is our own Ginkgo Sanctuary, which includes an assortment of varieties of the tree species, Ginkgo biloba. This unique species is known for its fan-shaped leaves and marked longevity. Some individual trees growing in Japanese and Chinese temple gardens are thought to be thousands of years old! They are extremely resilient trees, showing resistance to drought, floods, and most insect pests. These trees create great habitat for wildlife and assist with soaking up excess snow melt and rainwater. The area that has become the Ginkgo Sanctuary is historically prone to flooding, making it the perfect place for these new Ginkgo trees to thrive! (see photo above)



Our arborists, Alyssa, Spencer & Mike work together to plant a columnar Ginkgo tree to border the fruit Orchard.



New Tree Plantings

The warm temperatures this past winter left hardly any frost in the ground, so it was the perfect spring for planting! Over 200 trees and 100+ shrubs were planted this spring. This includes 44 bare root trees planted by the Sheboygan County Cancer Care Fund's Survive, Thrive & Be Fit members, for their annual Restoration Day volunteer activities along the Turkey Trot trail.



Above, left : Rob Pragalz gives a tree planting demonstration to the Survive, Thrive & Be Fit volunteers. Above, right: Our arborists haul in and plant large trees along the Turkey Trot trail.



Above, left : Spencer stakes in a newly planted tree in the Farm House prairie.

Above, right: Mike Scharl & Mike Prahll prepare trees to be moved and planted in their new homes.



Prescribed Prairie Burning

Every 3–4 years, in either Spring or Fall, we intentionally burn the Farm House prairie as a land management strategy. Just as nature intended, an occasional fire aids the prairie habitat in a few ways. A fire like this reduces the overall hazardous fuel by removing dead plant material, making the landscape more resilient to future fires. Fire also renews the soil composition by returning valuable nutrients and knocking back invasive and woody plant species. The overall wildlife of the area improves as native prairie species are able to move in and thrive. Our crew (Miles, Sherri, Mike & Laura) worked to direct the fire across the prairie in April.



A few parameters must be met for a prescribed prairie burn to take place. First, the weather has to cooperate. We wait for a warm day, when the moisture evaporates off the plants quickly in the morning, little to no wind, and no rain. We make a call to our local fire department and alert them of our activities, so they can reassure concerned members of the community when a few inevitably call in our “fire.” And of course, we need an experienced crew to monitor the fire throughout the day...and thankfully we have a great team!



Spring Beehive Preparations

After harvesting honey from our beehives last fall, we saved and used the extra beeswax to make candles and lip balm in February. Beeswax candles don't require added chemicals and therefore burn cleaner! A package of bees was added to the revamped Observation Hive at the end of April. School groups have the benefit of seeing inside a beehive by use of this special design.



Bluebird Trail Maintenance

Bluebirds begin migrating to Wisconsin in the last week of February into early March to locate a nesting spot and find a mate. The Sheboygan County Cancer Care Fund has volunteers who monitor a set of 12 bluebird houses within the property. In the photo above, you can see the group preparing the houses ahead of the nesting season.

Welcome Home Pepe & Licorice!



This spring, we welcomed two new Lionhead rabbits to the Children's Farm! These two were adopted from the Sheboygan County Humane Society. They have been settling into their new home and getting used to doing meet & greets with children's school groups over the last few weeks of April.

Licorice is the female black-haired rabbit in the photo to the right, and Pepe, the black and white male rabbit has been renamed from "Skunk".



New Hands-On Activities

A new hands-on dinosaur puzzle was completed throughout the winter. Sending a big "thank you" to Bob Hartig, a friend and member of the Sheboygan County Cancer Care Fund, who offered the use of his CnC

machine and skills to cut out the puzzle pieces. Chad Lilyquist helped by sanding the pieces and constructing the backboard and base of the puzzle. Kari Below let her artistry & creative vision shine throughout the project, from step one of the blueprints to the final stroke of the paint brush! This double-layer puzzle, now located in Jayrassic Park, will inspire teamwork and a love of paleontology for visiting families and school groups!



Phenology - “the study of cyclic and seasonal natural phenomena, especially in relation to climate and plant and animal life.”

Date: February 5, 2024

High Temp: 36; Overcast

Notes: A flock of Cedar Waxwings enjoyed frozen fruits in the Ornamental Pear trees by the Farm House



Date: February 20, 2024

High Temp: 39; Sunny

Notes: Daffodil sprouts are emerging near the Farm House pond

Date: March 13, 2024

High Temp: 50; Sunny

Notes: Two Bluebirds were spotted near the Bioswale by Project Bluebird volunteer, Tom Friedrichs



Date: April 8th, 2024

High Temp: 62; Sunny

Notes: The SCCCF group witnessed the solar eclipse near the Lake Michigan flagpole. Red Admiral butterflies and dragonflies were seen flying around the property

