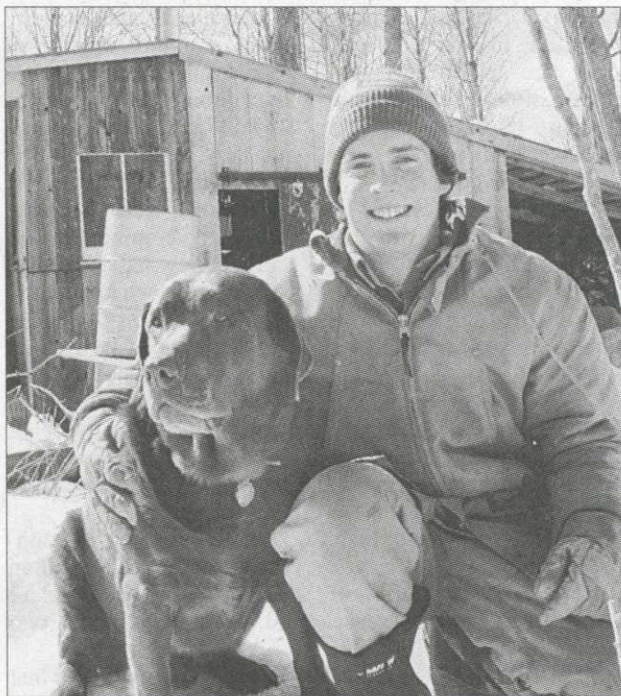


Success stories in Prince Edward County



Submitted photo by Graham Davies

Young Entrepreneur – Justin Williams and Hershey the chocolate lab, in front of the sugar shack where Justin has been making maple syrup since he was just a kid.

Justin Williams - teenaged maple maestro

By Janet Davies

First Nations people have made maple syrup for a thousand years. The early settlers sweetened their hardworking lives with it, and county farmers have made syrup for two centuries.

Justin Williams has been making his own maple syrup for 10 years. Not a long time in the grand scheme of things, but more than half his lifetime.

Justin is 17 years old, the son, grandson, great and great-great-grandson of Bloomfield farmers, and he's following in their industrious footsteps.

He began making maple syrup when he was 10 years old with his friend Phil Robland, tapping sugar maples behind Phil's house in Green Point before moving the equipment down to Justin's family farm and starting on the maples there.

"I started out with 50 the first year, all on buckets" says Justin. "Then it was 75, then 100."

When it hit 100, he began using pipelines to collect the sap. Now he taps 420 trees, 20 with pails and the remainder on lines.

His maternal grandparents, Rose and Pat O'Brien, often lend a hand at syrup-making time. His other grandfather, Bob Williams, a well-known figure in the Federation of Agriculture, and grandmother Helen, are right proud of Justin's entrepreneurial spirit and ability to recognize a good market opportunity.

"I get about 415 litres in a good year," he says.

As any maple lover knows, a litre of pure syrup is a valuable commodity. Justin's maple syrup, which he sells from the farm, has made him some serious cash, and he'll be using that when he goes off to study at Kemptville Agricultural College in September. His older sister, Lindsay, is already studying agribusiness at college.

The farm will stay in the family into the fifth generation and with any luck well beyond. With the enthusiasm of youth and the example of his forward-thinking family, Justin is confident of good times ahead.

"In 2014, Wilhome Farm will be 200 years old," he says with a grin. "That's really something to celebrate."

Justin believes in the future of farming, and he's never wanted to do anything else.

"I've worked on this farm all my life, it's what I enjoy the most," he says.

Wilhome is a dairy farm with cash crops growing on its own 500 acres plus additional rented land. Among other crops, last year they grew seed soy beans for Beatty Seeds, the Bloomfield supplier that exports all over the world.

Justin's maple syrup has gone around the world, too, including to Africa in the luggage of a doctor.

"My sister Brittany was being treated for cancer a while ago," he says. "She's okay now, thanks. But we used to spend a lot of time up at Sick Kids in Toronto with her. Well the doctors heard about my maple syrup, and they tried it and bought a bunch and one of them took some back to South Africa with him."

Justin's sugar shack is just behind the farmhouse. For years he used Phil's old evaporator that they'd started with, way back when they were 10. In 2006, Justin bought a brand new evaporator and this year added a steam hood that pushes production to nearly 50 litres an hour.

"I've still got to fit the chimneys," he says, indicating holes in the roof. Like all the best shacks, it's a funky looking structure built of weathered old planks. To get there, you walk under an old tree house. You can just picture the 10-year-old scrambling down the tree house ladder to go to work checking his sap buckets.

Making maple syrup is hard work at any age, and when it boils down to it (pardon the pun) doesn't make you a fortune. If he's lucky this year, Justin will boil 16,000 litres of sap for his 400 litres, and he'll package it in quantities from 50 ml souvenir bottles to massive four litre buckets.

Does his family like maple syrup? Are you kidding?

"The big buckets are actually just for the family," he says.

This agribusiness story is brought to you by Harvestin' the County and the economic development department of Prince Edward County. We welcome suggestions for profile subjects. Please contact Dan Taylor, economic development officer at 613-476-2148 ext. 246 or dtaylor@pecounty.on.ca .