

Once in a while this time of year, I embark on one of those prospective projects that germinate during busy periods and gradually develop into plans of actions. Other ideas disappear without a discernible trace, though they may come to mind again months or even years later.

Decades ago I had experimented with cooking granulated maple sugar. I had had some luck, but it wasn't the perfect success I had hoped. Periodically, over the years, I thought of it again, but never tried to repeat the process.

Then, last Christmas, my cousins gave us a gift of granular sugar made by their Shepherd maple group, and I was again intrigued. Merrie had enclosed a recipe for a maple shortbread cookie with the sugar, and when I tried it, it produced our usual--and favorite--Swedish farmer cookies, but with a subtle and delicious maple flavor. I used up the gift sugar in batches of those sweets.

A few days ago, there was an unexpected lull in activity here on the farm. Runo was working in the barn, preparing for winter, and our wood-cutting expeditions were on temporary hold. I'd canned the sauerkraut and started another batch, the week's washing and baking were done, and other work was under control. So, I decided to try the maple sugar again.

I started with just a quart of maple syrup. I poured it from the Mason jar into a heavy stainless steel four quart kettle. I brought the syrup to a boil and then reduced the heat to a point at which the foaming liquid was not quite enthusiastic enough to climb the sides of the kettle all the way to the top.

As the syrup cooked, it became thicker and foamier. I stirred it occasionally at first, and as it cooked down, I needed to stir continually, moving the heavy substance on the bottom of the pan to diminish the possibility of scorching. I had an aid in this endeavor that was especially appropriate.

A couple of years ago my Wisconsin cousins brought us wooden spatulas Harland had made. I had not used them often, though I found them handy for salad servers. But, they were just too beautiful to stick

into a pot of tomato sauce or a buttery fried dish that might discolor them. He had made them of birdseye maple, and they were just too pretty to use.

Now, though, I saw that a wooden spoon would not reach the bottom of the pan properly to scrap the entire surface. The flat edge of the maple spatula worked much better. And, I was happy to discover, the syrup washed off perfectly, and the spatula I used looks like new again. But how fitting it seemed to stir that granulating syrup with a tool made from the wood of the sugar maple tree itself.

When it seemed as if I dared not cook the syrup any longer--I could not keep it moving across the bottom of the pan-- I quickly took it from the heat and began to beat it with my hand mixer. I used the lowest speed possible, and it was not more than a couple of minutes before I had sugar. As I continued to beat it, the particles became smaller and smaller. When the maple had become similar in size to fine granulated cane or beet sugar, I stopped beating and sifted it with my flour sifter. From that one quart of syrup, I ended up with nearly four cups of fine maple sugar and a little bowl of coarser bits that were perfect as topping on vanilla ice cream.

Our excess maple syrup will now be a source of granulated sugar. I will experiment with other recipes that call for the usual white sugar. Some may work and others not turn out as well as I hope, but it will be another venture into the farm/home science projects that are ongoing.