



# Sweet Rewards of Cooking Cane Syrup

*By P. Bayne Moore, Registered Forester & Work Unit Manager,  
Alabama Forestry Commission*

**G**rowing up, everyone in my family had a garden — from my parents, to grandmother, to aunts and uncles. The whole family would work in these huge gardens, and at the edge of my family’s stood a sugarcane patch. The hard work paid off when we had home-raised food in our pantry, but the payoff for tending sugarcane was always a little sweeter.

The payoff? Cutting, peeling, and chunking the stalk, then chewing juice out of the pulp. When my son, Malcolm, was 3 or 4 years old, he had his first taste of this sweet nectar. My father, as always, was peeling a stalk to give his helpers. When it was Malcolm’s turn, he chewed the cane and loved it. But he missed the final and most crucial step — to spit out the chewed pulp. As sweet as the juice is, the pulp is just like swallowing cardboard or wood pulp. Lesson learned.

Throughout the years, the patch slowly got smaller and smaller as my father got older. If it was a bad

year and the cane stubble (or root where the cane was harvested) died from drought or cold weather, my father would search till he found a friend or stranger who could give him some stalks. Sometimes he

purchased them, but most of the time the supplier would say, “Take what you need. If and when I need some for planting, I will call.” And when they called, he would always help them out, even if it meant all his stalks went to a neighbor instead of the cane press.

As a child, I always wondered why my father never failed to have a sugarcane patch. It wasn’t until years later that he told me a wealthy landowner had moved his maternal grandfather to Octagon, Alabama, because he was the best sugarcane cooker around. For the last 63 years of his life, my father grew cane to honor the memory of his ancestors.

Sugarcane was brought to the U.S. by way of the West Indies around 1741. The South, mostly Louisiana, became home to sugarcane, which has many varieties and hybrids and is used to make syrup, white sugar, brown sugar, ethanol, and rum. In times past, families made syrup on the farm to eat and use as a sweetener. Although the

*(Continued on page 30)*



*Photo by Marlee Moore*





### *Sweet Rewards of Cooking Cane Syrup* (Continued from page 29)

years have rolled by and large-scale farming has evolved, small-time sugarcane production and syrup-making are similar to the techniques our ancestors used over 100 years ago.

Sugarcane is planted by laying and covering cane stalks in a deep furrow. Cane can be planted in fall after harvest, or banked out (laid in a pile and covered with hay to keep from freezing) and planted in spring before the nodes sprout and break through the soil. I've always had better luck planting in late fall.

The cane is harvested in late fall before the first big frost, which would make the juice bitter. Cane stubble will sprout year after year, as long as the stubble doesn't freeze. At some point, the sprouts will slack off, which means it's time to replant.

To start the cooking process, stalks are hauled to a cane roller mill where the juice is squeezed out.

The next step is evaporating the water to make syrup, either by batch or continuous cooking. 'Batch' cooking starts with a certain amount of juice, 10 to 50 gallons, depending on the size of the pot or kettle. The water is evaporated till the juice makes syrup.

On the other hand, continuous cooking uses an evaporator pan, roughly 8 feet long by 4 feet wide by 8 inches tall, with panels sectioning the pan off like a maze. Juice comes in one end, and as it heats, the juice is transformed to syrup by the time it gets to the other end of the maze. One gallon of juice will yield approximately three-quarters to one pint of syrup.

There are several critical steps that must be performed when cooking, or the finished product will be subpar. First the trash (chlorophyll, dirt, and wax) must be removed. Some screening takes place during squeezing, but most trash is skimmed off the top with a hand skimmer before boiling. The remainder is removed as it slowly rises to the top as the water evaporates.

Knowing when the juice has become syrup might be the most critical — and most difficult — step. Old timers dip a ladle in the liquid, and depending on how it forms and runs off, they know when the syrup is ready. Others use thermometers and know 225° F is the ideal temperature for syrup.

The hot syrup is strained through cheesecloth, poured in mason jars or plastic jugs, and sealed. Then it's ready to coat biscuits, sweeten pies, and remind you of a simpler, sweeter time. ☞

