

Menominee Maple Sugar Camp

Grades K-8

Knowledge Holder

This lesson was created by Lucy Grignon (Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Nation, Menominee Nation).



Materials

Book: *When the Shadbush Blooms* by Carla Messinger and Susan Katz

Through the changing cycle of the seasons, our most vital traditions have remained unbroken: gathering close with family and listening to the stories of the seasonal round.

Standards

This lesson aligns with national frameworks in Visual Arts, Social Studies, and Environmental Science by:

- Exploring how traditional storytelling and ecological knowledge guide sustainable forestry.
- Observing how changing winter temperatures directly impact natural processes like sap flow.
- Participating in community-led care practices that protect forest health.
- Understanding oral histories as living records of land relationships.

Objective

The Menominee Maple Sugar season is a beautiful time for learning. So much is happening in the world around us; all we have to do to learn is observe. As the seasons change, the trees grow, develop, and wake up. Students will learn about the traditional protocols of tapping the trees, boiling down sap, canning, storytelling, and processing. It is truly beautiful from beginning to end, filled with teachings for future generations. The lessons learned while working with maple trees can be directly applied and used in our own lives. The medicine we have is right within us, just like the Menominee Maple Trees.

Survivance Message

Trees are very special to Indigenous people, especially Menominee People. Trees are living, breathing, and older than human relatives, often referred to as Grandfathers. The Maple Sugar season is a sacred time for the community to gather, share food, and work together. Our classroom is a community as well. What can we learn from Maple Trees? What lessons do they share with us? They teach us that we are much stronger as a community working toward a shared goal rather than standing alone.

The medicine of the maple tree relies on a delicate balance: freezing nights and warm, sunny days in early spring. This constant back-and-forth between freezing and thawing is what wakes the tree up and coaxes the sweet sap to rise from its roots. But as our winters warm up and the spring thaws become unpredictable, that natural rhythm gets disrupted. When winters are too short or spring arrives too suddenly, the sap flow is disrupted, shortened, or altered. Protecting our maple relatives from extreme climate impacts is how we ensure this sweet seasonal relationship remains intact for the generations to come.

Activities

20 Min: Feel & Connect! (Inside the Classroom) Bring the spirit of the sugarbush into the classroom through shared reading and traditional storytelling.



Braiding Knowledge: Curriculum Standards

This lesson is part of a broader framework that weaves together the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITECK). We teach Western science through a localized, relational lens to honor the history and sovereignty of the land and its caretakers. For a detailed breakdown of how this lesson aligns with specific NGSS benchmarks, ITECK guidelines, and UNESCO climate action goals, please visit our [story map](#).

Menominee Vocabulary

sōpomāhtek-sōpomah (pron. Sew-po-mah-tick): Maple Sugar

Sūpomāhkwapoh (pron. sue-po-mah-kwa-po): Maple Syrup, Maple Sap

English Vocabulary

Traditional Storytelling, Medicine, Food as Medicine, Deep Connections, Strengthening Roots

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“Gather around as a community. We are going to research and read Indigenous children’s literature alongside selected chapters from Braiding Sweetgrass that highlight the relationship between the Menominee people and the Maple Trees. As we read, listen for how the tree is spoken of. It is not a ‘resource’ or a ‘product’ to be exploited for capitalism—the Maple is a grandfather, a teacher, and a relative. How does viewing a tree as an older relative change the way we behave when we step into the woods?”

Climate Prompt: Review the historic seasonal timelines of the maple harvest. Look at recent weather data. How are warmer winters shifting the exact week the sap begins to run? How do our communities adapt when the seasonal calendar begins to shift?

25 Min: Play! (Outside the Classroom) Step onto the land to investigate, map, and interact with the trees firsthand.

“Let’s go outside and visit our Maple Tree relatives. We will practice our observation skills to identify and investigate them. Notice the texture of their bark and the structure of their bare branches or early buds. What does it look like right now? Draw exactly what you see in your journals and share your sketch with a friend. Think about how we can identify and visit our Maple Tree relatives in all seasons: Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. Now, with respect and protocol, we will tap those trees and taste the raw, sweet maple sap. What do you notice about the taste, the temperature, and the patience required to catch each drop?”

Reciprocity through Stewardship

Invite students and families to the Menominee Maple Sugar Camp Spring Celebrations. Together, students and families will learn from community knowledge holders how to respectfully tap maple trees, cook down the raw sap into syrup, and further process the syrup into traditional maple sugar and candies. During this time, many traditional stories are shared around how the Maple Tree found her Medicine and learned to give selflessly to the people.

True reciprocity means giving back to the Grandfathers who feed us. Because warmer weather places a lot of stress on our maple forests, looking after them is up to us. Students can practice reciprocity by tending to the soil around local maples, planting native plants to keep the forest floor cool and moist. By dedicating our physical energy to protecting the health of the sugarbush, we return the medicine that the trees so freely give to us.

Resources

Omāēqnomenēweqnaesen, the Menominee language, has been passed down to us for many generations. This webpage is going to be useful for those that have chosen to pursue learning our language, history, and culture. Each of these are intertwined and can not exist on their own, and especially not without you. [Menominee Language Website](#)

Indigenous Coloring Book: The Sugarbush Coloring Book By Cassie Brown covers the traditional practices of Maple Syrup collection, processing, and operations. Included are pages on ceremonial preparation, tapping trees, collecting and boiling down sap, cultural exchanges that happen during processing, and finishing of Maple Syrup.

[The Menominee Nation: Stewards of Sustainability](#) - Come along as we head into the forests of the first stewards and uncover a story rooted in the long history of sustainability.

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Adaptations & Extensions

This lesson can expand into seasonal, year-round observations of forest ecology, climate tracking, and oral history documentation. To deepen their understanding, students can explore:

- [Menominee Clan Stories](#) (via the College of Menominee Nation) to understand the structural role of environmental relatives in community governance.
- [The Menominee Culture Throughout the Seasons archives](#) (via the Milwaukee Public Museum) to map how tribal movements changed in response to ecological indicators.
- [The Story of Manabush](#) (Menominee Oral Tradition) to examine the spiritual and philosophical lessons embedded in traditional storytelling.

Community Extension: Menominee Elders and community knowledge holders carry a vast wealth of historical and ecological data. Invite local elders into the classroom to share their personal memories and oral histories of the Maple Sugar Camp over the decades. Ensure that students practice proper protocol by preparing a meaningful, handmade gift or offering to present to the elders, showing deep gratitude for sharing their time and sacred knowledge with the world.