

# Marketing Special Forest Products in New York State

A practical manual for forest-based enterprises



Cornell University  
Cooperative Extension

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## About this publication

Increasing numbers of forest owners in New York are seeking new ways to offset the costs of woodland ownership or combine recreation with unique rural enterprises. Many forests are unsuitable for commercial timber management due to past logging practices, parcel size, terrain, or incompatibility with the owner's forest stewardship goals. Some farmers and forest owners are turning to special forest products as a hobby or source of supplemental income to increase their enjoyment of their woodlands.

The purpose of this publication is to illustrate the handling, storage, and marketing facets of special forest products in New York. Many existing forest product guides provide explicit production information, yet offer only vague remarks about marketing. Suggestions and references are provided in this manual to help forest owners recognize the most important elements of successful marketing of special forest products through direct and indirect sales.

This publication is the first version of what will become a more comprehensive manual about marketing special forest products in the Northeast. Suggestions about additional content, resources, worksheets, and contributors can be directed to Jim Ochterski at (607) 535-7161 or jao14@cornell.edu.

Each forest owner considering marketing special forest products will face different circumstances, based on experience, personality, income objectives, and location. Even with careful planning, some marketing efforts will not meet the intended objectives. Fortunately, there are many options and alternative marketing mechanisms for forest-derived niche products.

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## Introduction

This Agroforestry Marketing Guide was developed to excite rural woodlot owners about the potential for growing, harvesting, and selling ecologically sustainable crops. There are many people who have never heard of forest crops, or do not know how to find the various kinds of forest products that can come from New York's woodlands. This guide will help connect producers with these potential customers.



This guide is a landmark for New York's emerging forest farming sector. No other state or organization has produced a guide to meet the marketing needs of private agroforestry product growers, so it stands to place forest farmers in the state at a competitive advantage.

The most common approach to marketing special forest products involves inefficient trial-and-error, resulting in wasted time, poor use of products, and little or no profitability. Because new and experienced agroforestry producers report frustration with marketing, this booklet is intended to inspire and inform. It attempts to address a lack of understanding by agroforestry entrepreneurs about what retailers need and what consumers expect from new or niche forest based products.

Farm profitability is a significant challenge in rural, forested areas, where metropolitan markets are distant and per capita income is low. The key to profitability is to understand, access, and create new markets. Additionally, forest product growers need to understand that retailers are selective about what products they will sell. This Agroforestry Marketing Guide suggests many ways to make New York-produced forest products more visible and available to residents and tourists alike.

Agroforestry marketing is a combination of the actions and attitudes that convert a stock of a product (forest mushrooms, ginseng roots, maple syrup) to income. Producers will first have to work out production and harvesting techniques to create a sellable product. At nearly the same time, they need to assess and begin to research a variety of sales opportunities. This guide provides ideas and insights about who might be buying agroforestry products and why. Following the remainder of the Introduction,

which explains the overarching concepts of sustainability, personality, and business considerations, this booklet is organized into two major sections. Sections 1.1 through 1.6 are an overview of agroforestry products and their marketing characteristics. It includes recommendations about handling and choosing product-specific packaging options. These sections include forest-cultivated mushrooms, maple products, nuts and berries, ginseng and forest botanicals, landscaping and habitat restoration products, and specialty wood and decorative products. Sections 2.1 through 2.3 analyze local, regional, and distant agroforestry markets, plus potential promotional strategies to reach them.

Effective marketing can encourage the sustainable use of woodland resources. By creating a steady demand for non-timber forest products, forest managers will have an economic incentive to balance production objectives with concerns for long-term forest health. Agroforestry can be a good activity for those with woodlands unsuitable for a timber sale due to timing, size, or physical qualities, or for those reluctant to conduct a timber sale. Forest crops, if properly chosen, will grow in any woodlot in New York. It is a fun hobby, a conversation piece, and a good way to meet people interested in productive conservation of our forest resources.

This guide is all about creatively inventing new markets for forest crops, which many people have never heard of. The potential markets are truly unknown at this point, but to provide a sense of the possibilities, consider the options presented in the accompanying chart.

The markets for forest crops such as mushrooms, native landscape products, nuts, berries, and decoratives are relatively undefined. Even so, there is likely to be a great potential to bring such unusual products into widespread public

	Direct to consumer	Bakery / confectioner	Restaurant	Inn or Bed and Breakfast	Florist / nursery / greenhouse	Licensed dealers	Clubs / guilds	Gift shops	Internet
Maple syrup	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Forest-cultivated mushrooms	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Nuts & berries	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Decoratives	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Herbals	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Flavorings	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Weaving / dyeing materials	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓
Plant materials / seeds	✓				✓		✓	✓	✓

recognition through agroforestry marketing. This guide describes dozens of ways to introduce various forest products, few of which are “tried and true,” but all of which are feasible. While some readers will be inspired, others may think, “That’ll never work.” Your job is to weigh each suggestion based on your own personality and your interest in making a “go” out of uncertain markets.

### **The marketing personality**

Special forest products are still emerging in many places, so special forest product marketers are very few and very far between. If you are wondering at this point if you will make a successful marketer, as well as grower, consider the following traits (adapted from Stevens, 2001):

- Special forest product marketers are honest and practical people who will try new ideas every few months to get their products sold. They feel most satisfied when they acquire a new customer or marketing angle.
- Special forest product marketers are creative and passionate about their products. They are not shy about touting the benefits of using their flavoring wood, or why New York pure maple syrup is obviously superior to all other syrups. They do not worry about a few rejections because there are still so many other leads out there.
- Balancing extroversion and introversion, agroforestry marketers keep in regular contact with their customers and other key contacts.
- Special forest product marketers know they cannot be successful by themselves. They ask for help from their customers to spread the word, from Extension and other agency professionals, and from family members who support their endeavor.

### **Running a forest-based enterprise as a small business**

Before marketing, there is the issue of how to operate your business. Below are six core practices required to turn a forest crop into a profitable enterprise (adapted from Tweeten, 2001):

- 1) Have a serious attitude about your agroforestry enterprise
- 2) Use professionals for advice
- 3) Operate within all local, state and federal laws and regulations
- 4) Have an orderly and clean workplace
- 5) Have good quality printed materials, and
- 6) Maintain good customer service and use good manners at all times.

### **Income from agroforestry**

In agroforestry, there is a big difference between profitability and full-time income. Although there are instances of woodland owners making a living from crops like ginseng, or mushrooms, this is not typical. More likely, you will be able to cover the expenses of your well-run enterprise, earn some additional revenue, and enjoy the process. This will be a part-time venture for most people.

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Agroforestry is the practice of intentionally utilizing trees as part of a planned production system.

## Section 1.0

### Overview of agroforestry products in New York

Agroforestry is the practice of intentionally utilizing trees as part of a planned production system. In this guide, the focus will be on forest farmed crops and materials collected sustainably. Marketable agroforestry products include:

#### Berries and wild fruits

Forest owners can harvest edible fruit and berries when they are ripe. Naturally growing and cultivated woodland fruits include:

Serviceberry	Pawpaw
Currants - red, white, or black	
Raspberries	Lowbush blueberries
Gooseberry	Lignoberrries
Highbush cranberry	Hardy kiwifruit
American cranberry	Blue honeysuckle
Chokecherry (Aronia)	Sea buckthorn
Elderberry	Cornelian cherry

Some of the at-home uses include flavoring meals, garnishing salads, or serving the fruits to birds. Some forest plants and trees contain high amounts of nutrients. To keep this project going

for the long term, plant new trees and shrubs every year and only harvest a small amount, even when they are abundant.

#### Cones and seeds

Active forest owners can collect pinecones, acorns, hickory nuts, beechnuts, and hazelnuts from the forest floor. Of course, nut orchards will provide a wider variety of nut trees. Supply is important, so you should replant species to continue production, and plan to manage your timber to favor nut- and cone-producing trees.

#### Cooking wood, smoke wood, and flavorwood

Cooking wood represents true interaction with your forest. You can select favorable species, then cut and split the wood to produce a useful size and shape to accommodate cooking and grilling. Wood smoke enhances meat and fish flavors, imparting a rustic scent to the food. You can also place the wood into incense holders and steamers.

#### Decorative wood

Begin by assessing your forest for hardwoods with knots, burls, or unusual shapes. If you have a good inventory of these, also consider collecting logs with decorative bark, such as white birch and American beech. Common uses include wall and hearth decorations, coasters, furnishings, bases for carvings, frames, bird feeders, and other rustic-



looking uses. You will get more out of a sustainably managed forest, so use only species and trees removed as part of a long-term management plan.

### **Forest botanicals as flavorings, medicinals, and pharmaceuticals**

As one of the oldest uses of forests, you can begin identifying and harvesting roots, berries, stems, or foliage of plants known to have beneficial uses. Proper identification is clearly important if you intend to use these forest products. Harvest only small portions of vigorous populations, and replant or create a cultivated area.

### **Greenery and floral products**

You can harvest evergreen branches and vines used for decorative floral arrangements such as pine, spruce, grapevine, and bittersweet, among many others. These forest products are frequently purchased for seasonal decoration, fragrance, or as floral arrangements.

### **Transplants and propagation**

Some forest owners are creating new forests by cultivating native trees and shrubs in the ground or in pots within their forested area. These shrubs and trees are hard to find in some areas, or require shipping. They are used in landscaping, attracting wildlife, and conservation. For the long term, keep re-planting native species.

### **Honey**

Woodland honey is special, as it captures floral qualities not available in wildflower meadows. Locust trees and basswood both have suitable flowers for high-quality honey production. Hives are placed near forests during the proper blossoming time. The honey is harvested and can be marketed as a specialty honey at a higher price.

### **Mushrooms**

One of the classic “forest farming” practices, woodlot owners are growing mushrooms for their own consumption. Various species of mushrooms are inoculated on cut logs in forests. They are used as a food, a potential natural remedy to ailments, and as a potent flavoring. Use logs cut according to a forest management plan.

### **Syrup**

Harvesting maple sap, boiling it and packaging it as a sweet syrup is a common rural tradition. Maple syrup is produced in a relatively small portion of the world, with the greatest production centered in the Northeast. It is a food, a flavoring, and a base for other maple products.

### **Weaving and dyeing materials**

Obtaining the right kinds of materials from forests for weaving and dyeing will take some research, but plenty of information is available.

Some forest owners will be inclined to experiment with various plant uses. Usually, these materials are used to create natural products for decoration, coloring textiles, and weaving baskets or small-scale crafts.

### **Specialty wood products**

You can utilize tree species often overlooked by commercial logging companies, including basswood, black birch, white birch, poplar, elm, and butternut. These species are ideal for some types of carving, framing, making instruments, fabricating walking sticks, and making decorations.



This section provides tips and guidance regarding the handling, storage, and marketing of forest cultivated mushrooms

## Section 1.1

### Forest cultivated mushrooms

Mushrooms are becoming increasingly popular and consumers are already changing the types and amounts of mushrooms they eat. Most of the mushrooms eaten in the United States are so called “white” or “button” mushrooms of the genus *Agaricus*, including white, crimini, and portabella. Like other food trends, consumption of mushrooms will continue to diversify, as consumers and food professionals try new flavors and textures (Zidenberg-Cherr, 2002).

This represents a good opportunity for woodland owners who would like to establish a small-scale crop in their woodlands.

This section provides tips and guidance regarding the handling, storage, and marketing of forest cultivated mushrooms like oyster, maitake, shiitake, and lion’s mane.

Forest cultivated mushrooms are grown on sawdust beds, logs, straw bales, stumps, and other dead or dying plant material. After inoculation and a period

of mycelial growth, these saprophytic fungi “fruit” into the form we call mushrooms. There is considerable information available about forest mushroom cultivation, available through Cornell Cooperative Extension and other land-grant university extension systems. The book, *Growing Gourmet and Medicinal Mushrooms*, 3rd Ed. by Paul Stamets (Stamets, 2000) is an excellent reference about mushroom cultivation.

#### Post-harvest handling of mushrooms

Harvest forest cultivated mushrooms with a knife, or by twisting the stem (stipe) so it breaks free. Gently brush off any dirt or debris, without washing the mushroom under water, and place each mushroom into an open basket, paper sack, or other vented container (Filip, 1988).

Mushrooms like shiitake that have a large cap are more marketable when the cap is still curled and somewhat closed. Wide, flattened

mushroom caps indicate over-maturity and will not be as valuable as the fresher-looking forms.

Refrigerate forest-grown mushrooms as soon as possible after harvesting. These mushrooms will remain fresh and marketable for several weeks. Do not seal them in an airtight container. Keep delicate mushrooms, like oyster mushrooms, in a single layer. More durable mushrooms can be separated into layers with paper towels. Make sure that your customer also has the appropriate refrigeration equipment, or if you are selling at a farm market or through a small retailer, that they can store your product adequately.

To maximize your mushroom enterprise income, try to focus on providing fresh mushrooms, rather than dried or frozen. Fresh mushrooms retain the best flavor and texture. Set up a system for rotating out or drying older mushrooms and maintain a consistently fresh supply of new mushrooms.

In an emergency, slice and dry the mushrooms with a convection dryer, rather than throwing them out. Dried mushrooms are not as desirable to some customers, but they keep for months and may be of interest at a lower price per pound for making soups and stews. However, off-season demand of these same mushrooms may make them very much worth storing in a dry and frozen condition.

Canning or pickling fresh, unopened mushrooms can be done at home with a pressure canner, but would require a food processor’s license in New York for retail sale of any kind. The marketability of such a product is unexplored. Usually only domestic mushrooms are used for canning and pickling as wild mushrooms are not recommended for this kind of preservation.

Mushrooms need to be treated to stop maturation before freezing, usually by steaming. Soak mushrooms in a mixture containing 1 teaspoon lemon juice or 1.5 teaspoons citric acid per pint of water for 5 minutes to reduce darkening. Steam whole mushrooms 5 minutes, buttons or quarters 3.5 minutes and slices 3 minutes. Cool promptly, drain and package, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Place small packages in the freezer for fast cooling (Andress & Harrison, 1999).

#### Selling points

- Forest cultivated mushrooms have more fiber than white mushrooms, very few calories (4 - 10 per ounce), little or no fat, no sodium, and no simple sugars, like sucrose.
- Specialty mushrooms have a wide range of flavors, from mild to robust that allow buyers to create more sophisticated cuisines in their homes.

- Forest-cultivated mushrooms are thought to have a wide variety of medicinal properties, which are alleged, but not proven (so avoid definite claims):
  - Lion's mane (*Hericium erinaceus*) - augmenting nerve growth, immune system response, anti-cancer
  - Maitake (*Grifola frondosa*) - antiviral, anti-cancer, diabetic regulation, anti-infection
  - Shiitake (*Lentinula edodes*) - cholesterol treatment, anti-infection, hypertension treatment
  - Oyster (*Pleurotus ostreatus*) - cholesterol treatment, anti-tumor
- Specialty mushrooms can be cooked in a variety of ways, including grilling, sautéing, stir-frying, or baking. They can be added to enhance to any vegetable, egg, or meat dish. Mushrooms make up an important texture component in meatless meals.
- Mushrooms are a good value with reasonable pricing.
- Mushrooms are a source of B-complex vitamins like riboflavin and niacin, and the mineral selenium.
- Forest-grown mushrooms are cholesterol free.

## Keys to marketing forest-cultivated mushrooms

One of the most important aspects of marketing an unusual food like specialty mushrooms is your reputation (Boyle, 2004). You must be able to provide clean, sound, contaminant-free mushrooms. The idea that the mushrooms are cultivated, rather than harvested from the wild, helps ensure the reliability of your product and reduces concerns about accidental poisoning.

Every one of your customers has to trust you and your product. For this reason, buyers like restaurants and individuals like to buy from an individual or business they know. If you bring a box of oyster mushrooms to a buyer, every single mushroom must be in good condition. Remove any that are questionable, as they will ruin the others, and your reputation.

Once you establish your trustworthiness, selling mushrooms will become easy. It may boil down to having a list of contacts - families, bed and breakfasts, restaurants, other growers - and calling them one-by-one to sell what you have growing. Keep written records about who buys

what and how much. If you unexpectedly get a large fruiting, it will be easier to spot who will readily buy them. Ask your customers if they would be willing to become a surplus buyer at a discount.



Develop an easily identifiable set of mushroom packages. For example, use all white paper bags with a clear label that identifies the mushroom, the package weight, and storage information. Every package you sell should have your contact information clearly marked.

Ask your buyer if some level of processing would help. Labor to process mushrooms in a restaurant (cleaning, slicing, etc.) is expensive and sometimes hard to find. Packages of sliced mushrooms, or caps only, may be a more attractive product, but you won't know unless you ask.

Once your customers catch on to the flavors and textures of forest-grown mushrooms, they will likely start asking for additional types. Plan to expand your enterprise accordingly, adding on new types of mushrooms, in keeping with your goals as a forest crop grower.

Normally, mushrooms are sold in grocery stores in the produce section. Smaller fresh produce stores, ethnic markets, and farm markets stock mushrooms as well. Most of the time, you will see only *Agaricus* mushrooms for sale, with a few bins of specialty mushrooms.

It is going to be hard to compete on price because mass-produced mushrooms are so inexpensive and easy to obtain. Rather than quantity, focus your efforts on providing consis-



tent quality, service (delivery, slicing), education (recipes, advice), personal attention, and a trusting relationship. You are providing a special, hard-to-get product. You are in the business of meeting a buyer's needs, rather than simply growing mushrooms for sale.

Mushrooms are almost always sold by weight. Specialty mushroom prices shift around, but you can expect \$8.00 to \$20.00 per pound, if you sell by the pound. A high-quality product will sell for more. Smaller packages can be sold at higher unit prices. For example, one Central New York mushroom grower receives \$4.00 for a 4 oz. bag of shiitake mushrooms. Blends of two or more mushrooms can be considered a premium package, a "gourmet mix." Prices will vary by season and the quality of your product.

No matter the price, make sure that your weights are accurate, and maybe a little on the generous side. In other words, make sure a "12 ounce bag" of your mushrooms weighs at least twelve ounces.

When you establish good relationships with buyers, as this section recommends, you may have to reduce your price to satisfy your customers periodically. Sometimes fruiting comes unintentionally and you are sitting on a lot more mushrooms than you expected. Older mushrooms are worth less due to reduced flavor, toughness, and rapid perishability. In these situations, work to keep the customer, rather than throwing out

a bunch of mushrooms or converting them to a low-value dried product as a result of a relationship gone wrong.

As with all special forest products, low or inconsistent quality does not sell. Once you have worked out your production methods, consistently supply your customers and contacts with predictably excellent mushrooms.

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## Section 1.2

# Maple syrup and maple products

Maple syrup and its spin-off products are the most widely recognized special forest products in North America. Unfortunately, high recognition has not translated into the desired level of widespread consumption. Although abundant and pervasive in the Northeast, Great Lakes region, and the eastern provinces of Canada, maple products are somewhat underutilized in the region and across the continent. Only a small percent of New Yorkers regularly use maple syrup. Because maple syrup is at least a familiar product to most potential customers, producers have an excellent opportunity to market maple products.

Maple producers are often frustrated by wide fluctuations in sales and production. Some maple producers are concerned about not being able to predict whether they will sell all they produce. This section describes a variety of ways small- to mid-scale producers can improve their sales of maple syrup and related maple products in their communities and regions. Should the maple industry conduct a national or international marketing campaign, producers who already make themselves highly visible will have an additional marketing advantage. Maple's ongoing reputation for purity and old-fashioned wholesomeness is a tremendous asset. Uniquely tree-derived, maple syrup epitomizes "natural" food and a historically earth-friendly product. Images of sap collection, winter beauty, and family-based activities are all



Jonas Kennedy

part of the enduring maple syrup image. Some consumers regard genuine maple syrup as a premium product, something reserved for special occasions or as a gift. Fortunately more

and more consumers, especially young adults, regularly purchase small food luxuries like gourmet sauces or espresso coffee drinks. Maple syrup purchases reflect a similar indulgence.

### The retail maple market

Although it is tempting to group all the individuals to whom you sell (and would like to sell) maple syrup as "the customers," there is a lot more diversity in the retail maple market than first meets the eye. All these potential buyers can be broken down into various groups, each requiring a different approach:

- 1) People who like pure maple syrup, and buy it wherever convenient (a huge, international market).
- 2) People who like pure maple syrup, and would prefer to purchase it from the producer, rather than at the grocery store (a significant number of people, mostly in maple-producing regions).
- 3) People who like pure maple syrup and exclusively purchase from one producer as much as possible (loyal customers).
- 4) People who are ambivalent about maple syrup products (another huge, international group).
- 5) People who do not find pure maple syrup appealing (a small segment of the population who do not know what they are missing).

If you are serious about marketing maple syrup on a direct retail basis, you will recognize group 3 as the most valuable group of all. Major corporations spend millions of dollars trying to establish loyalty; it is the grand prize of marketing.

In the maple sector, customers are not just buying your syrup or candy. They are buying a little bit of your world in each bottle – your sugarbush, your labor each winter, your attention to quality, and your personality. Loyal maple customers (who despise artificial pancake syrup) are in it partly for the relationship with the natural world you manage. Perhaps unintentionally, you have established a reputation with these folks. Make their loyalty a priority. If they have purchased a significant amount of product from you, reward them with added personal service and support their endeavors as much as possible.

From a practical point of view, loyal maple customers can leverage your maple products for

In the maple sector, customers are not just buying your syrup or candy. They are buying a little bit of your world in each bottle.

you. Here are some examples of you can build on an existing customer's relationship:

- Encourage your customers to refer people to you or provide them with a sampler to share with their friends.
- Suggest gift packages from your sugarbush for special occasions. For holiday sales, mail a catchy flyer in early November.
- Share your goals for developing a larger customer base with your loyal customers, and ask for their suggestions. They are often eager to help you consider alternative ideas.
- Correspond through a simple newsletter or mini-catalog, which may include other products, like preserves, pancake mixes, or cookie mixes. Such mailings should go out only to those customers who have willingly provided their postal address for your mailing list.
- Host a special open house to thank your better customers. With an off-season reception or pancake breakfast, you will continue to solidify the relationship, and give these customers even more reasons to buy from you. Even if your regular customers do not attend, the invitation will help demonstrate your interest in them.

The second most important retail maple consumer group is comprised of people who like maple syrup, and would prefer to purchase it directly from a producer rather than at the grocery store. This may be the biggest untapped market available. Thousands of families in cities and suburbs in North America are quietly looking for a better connection to the natural world and country appeal. Your maple syrup operation is out there, ready to treat them to a taste of country life.

If you look closely at the maple products available in most grocery stores, the labels try to convey this romantic connection to rural life. Tin containers with snowbound sugarhouses, sugar maple tree silhouettes, horse-drawn carts, and steam billowing in the chilly air are all trying to convey the same thing: connection to the country. Your goal should be to provide this group a country taste at improved convenience.

The key to reaching this group of maple syrup consumers is visibility. The customer in this group is ready and willing to buy your product; they just need to know who is selling and how to find you. Some city and suburban customers are willing to make a special trip to you for a quart or two of maple syrup. The more visible you are, with a clear message that you are

interested in meeting face-to-face, the more likely they will start buying directly from you, rather than the grocery store. Some marketers would say you should "make it easy for customers to give you money." Good advice.

A large group of maple consumers buy maple products wherever they can find them, regardless of the producer. It is more challenging to reach this group, but much of your effort should again focus on visibility. You must be seen to be patronized. Sooner or later, you will convert some of these general maple product buyers to more loyal customers.

Some examples of how you can easily make your maple operation more distinct are:

- News release - Television stations and newspapers in smaller cities often pursue offbeat or interesting stories to complement the hard news of the day. The earliest trickle of sap in mid-winter may be a common event for you, but promoted as a special seasonal milestone in a rural community, the "first run" will boost your visibility. Keep the news release simple and focused on images of interest (replace a few taps to provide sap dripping from spouts, rather than through tubing).
- Maple products as fundraisers - Non-profits are frequently seeking new and unique ways to raise money. Containers of maple syrup can be offered to a nature center, Scout troop, or church youth group at a discounted price. In turn, the non-profit can host a special sale or include your product in an existing sales fundraiser. This act of local charity support will distinguish your maple operation in the eyes of the charity and their patrons.
- Presentation to civic group - Service organizations (Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, etc.) frequently seek speakers for their meetings. Prepare a 15 to 20 minute presentation, usually with slides, little known information, or samples of your maple product. This is a good way to introduce your business to a receptive audience. Become an educator for a while, and the unspoken advertising will come subtly.
- Teach a class - Educational events for the public always distinguish maple producers from artificial syrup manufacturers. School tours, introductory classes, and off-season woodswalks build the allegiance you may be seeking among maple syrup consumers.

What about all those people who only buy arti-



cial syrup? It will take an organized effort by the maple industry and individual producers to win over people who are ambivalent about maple products or do not find them appealing. A wide array of repeated messages promoting maple products will help, but the best way to reach ambivalent consumers is by providing a direct experience with maple products. They will need to taste the syrup, savor the cream, and crunch on the candy and sugar products to eventually become maple customers.

The direct experience with maple syrup starts with personal contact with maple producers. Whether at county and state fairs, community festivals, shopping center events, and entertainment events, the best marketers of maple products are maple producers themselves. Subtly, a human relationship will go a long way toward putting a face on the maple products you sell. Every minute you spend and every contact you make at a maple producer's association booth is time well spent over the long term. You, as an individual, have a lot of control over people's perceptions of maple products. Shake hands, smile, and be friendly. This will eventually convert ambivalence to support for the maple industry.

Another way of providing a direct experience is by combining entertainment and recreation with an awareness of maple products. This is



Jonas Kennedy

a subtle, but important way of moving customers from occasional to consistent purchasers. Maple Weekend in New York has become the best way to connect with people who can be converted to more regular maple customers. These events make it easier for people unfamiliar with rural destinations to find and visit maple production facilities directly. During this event, there are different ways to make your maple operation more than just syrup in a jug. Here are some examples:

- U-tap maple time. Families travel to your sugarhouse and sugar bush at a designated time and rent a clean 5-gallon bucket. They hike into a portion of the

sugar bush and dump sap buckets into their own bucket and return it full to the sugarhouse. The sap is then added to the bulk tank, and the rented (or purchased) 5-gallon bucket is used repeatedly. Flags are used to designate sap buckets already emptied in the sugar bush. In return for their work, these visitors may receive a sampler of syrup.

- Corn mazes are very popular in the autumn, attracting hundreds of thousands of paying visitors to farms. Maple producers may be able to set up a tubing maze or some other interactive attraction for the general public. Families are very eager to begin their outdoor weekend activities toward the end of the winter season.
- Encourage visitors to linger by setting up a pen with small livestock (sheep, goats) or a photo station with old farm equipment or benches with a scenic backdrop.

The importance of direct experience in increasing maple product awareness sales cannot be overstated. Although the steam-laden smells and sights of sugaring is familiar to maple producers, it is an exciting and appealing experience for suburban and urban dwellers. Pictures on the label can only go so far. If you can deliver the real thing - a few moments alongside an evaporator running full-tilt, or in a sugar bush while the sap is running - you will establish a desirable connection between the buyer and your maple product. Although it creates extra work in the busy late winter season, the connections established during personal visits last through the year. These experiences are already translating into a higher level of awareness and commitment to maple products.

## Marketing grades of maple syrup

The discrepancy between USDA maple syrup grades, which are based on color, and consumer preferences, which are usually based on flavor, is becoming more explicit. There is an effort underway by the North American Maple Syrup Council to develop a more comprehensive standard. Light amber syrup, considered the highest grade, has the most delicate flavor. More full-bodied maple flavors are apparent with the darker grades.

Part of your job as a service-oriented maple producer is to allow customers to taste the different grades and decide for themselves which grade they prefer. Most consumers are not aware of the differences in grades and will appreciate the comparison. As with New York's apple varieties, it will be helpful for consum-

ers to start recognizing their preferences. For information about grading standards, refer to the North American Maple Syrup Producers Manual (Koelling & Heiligmann, 1996).

## Selling points

Maple syrup and maple products have a long list of selling points:

- In addition to sucrose, sugars in maple syrup include small amounts of glucose and fructose - which some people find more easily digestible.
- Unlike artificial sweeteners, maple syrup contains important minerals, particularly potassium and calcium. These minerals are derived from the soil and filtered through the tree in the sap.
- Maple syrup has fewer calories per serving than corn syrup, a common base ingredient for artificial syrup.
- Maple syrup has had a substantially similar flavor and texture for hundreds of years - a unique heritage taste. Additionally, maple syrup is as pure now as it was 200 years ago.
- All pure maple products are suitable for vegan and vegetarian consumption, a growing proportion of consumers in North America.
- A sugarbush is a sustainable use of a forest resource, providing habitat for wildlife, water quality protection, and cleaner air.
- Every purchase of maple products benefits your local economy.
- Maple products are almost always produced without pesticides.

## Packaging maple syrup

A portion of maple syrup marketing is accomplished through effective packaging (Koelling & Heiligmann, 1996). Maple producers have many container options, from the common plastic jug to decorative glass and tin, to unique wine bottle-shaped packages. Customers expect a blend of utility, easy storage, easy use and attractiveness.

Currently, the standard maple syrup package is a small- to medium-sized plastic jug for home storage and consumption. Variations on the jug include custom graphics, recipes, and nutritional information. Plastic jugs preserve the maple character very well.

One downside to these jugs is portion control. Consumers with children report a lot of wasted

syrup because of over pouring. Although they can be hard to find, maple producers should strive to meet the needs of typical consumers by providing spouts on jugs, or separate spouts that can be switched from container to container. Producers like Merle Maple [www.merlemaple.com] are offering a thinner bottle with a flip-top, no-drip cap that is easier for kids to handle.

Glass containers provide a great deal of visual appeal. Syrup grade and clarity is readily visible. For gifts or restaurant use, glass containers are very appealing. They are less easily transported, and many consumers understand that they are paying for fancy packaging as well as the product. Portion control is less of a problem because the syrup can be seen flowing toward the spout. Syrup in glass will darken very slowly.

Tin containers appeal to a small segment of consumers, particularly those that prefer traditional or nostalgic items. Producers using tin containers should caution buyers about long-term storage - tinned steel can impart a metallic taste to the syrup as the tin degrades.

The labels on maple syrup and maple products are an excellent opportunity for marketing after the sale. As noted in the North American Maple Syrup Producers Manual, labels should include: the name of the product and producer, maple syrup grade, suggested uses, volume, and how to report problems with the product. One way to retain your customers is to include convenience information such as how to warm maple syrup in a microwave oven, accurate substitutions in recipes calling for granulated sugar, recommended pancake mixes, or quick recipes. Include your contact information and list other products you carry. If your enterprise has e-mail or a website, include that on the label as well. Finally, include details about ordering "replacement bottles" when the current container is empty. Your customers will appreciate any convenience you provide.

## Understand the appeal of artificial syrup

To most North American consumers, artificial



pancake syrup is just as, if not more, familiar as maple syrup. Name brand syrups rely on millions of dollars in television advertising, co-packaging with pancake mixes, youth-directed ads, and dominant store shelf placement to maintain their visibility. Containers of artificial syrup are designed primarily for convenience, with portioning spouts, a narrow shape that children can manipulate, and microwave-ready materials to easily warm the syrup. Of course, the price of artificial syrups is very attractive in a culture where low unit cost frequently trumps quality.

A second source of direct competition for maple syrup is fruit-flavored syrups, like blueberry, strawberry, and cinnamon-spice syrup. Consumers purchase these as an indulgence and to vary their culinary experience at home. Diversifying syrup flavors is a viable marketing strategy for maple producers. Fruit syrups are not difficult to make, and can provide the variety or novelty many customers seek.

## Maple customer research

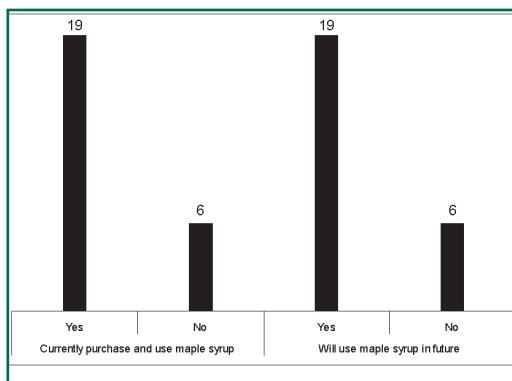
If you want to take a more quantifiable approach to identifying customers, follow the guidelines of Chapter 10 in the North American Maple Syrup Producers Manual (Koelling & Heiligmann, 1996). It provides a thorough procedure to characterize your customers, target advertising, choose wholesale or retail buyers, and establish an overall marketing strategy.

There is a vast market for pure maple syrup that is substantially untapped. The key for small- to mid-scale maple producers is to increase visibility. Whether through an open house, a pre-season flyer, a newspaper article, or a personal conversation at a county fair, maple syrup producers have the ability to convert many consumers into more committed pure maple product buyers.

## Wholesale maple sales

The idea of selling maple syrup on a wholesale level is appealing in the sense that many bottles leave your operation at once, rather than one or two at a time. Fortunately, there appears to be a lot of wholesale maple syrup buyers that are not being serviced in New York. During a small survey of food service businesses (restaurants, wineries, confectioners, processors) in 2004, Cornell Cooperative Extension determined that there is and will be a demand for maple syrup products at restaurants and hospitality businesses.

Pure maple syrup is used by a significant number of the food and hospitality establishments surveyed. Furthermore, respondents reported



a strong interest in continuing to use it. The source of the maple syrup used by these establishments is unknown, but during personal conversations, restaurant owners rarely mentioned a New York maple producer they knew and patronized. Some food establishment owners, like the proprietor of a Finger Lakes region ice cream company, found the idea of buying from a local producer very appealing and sought referrals right away.

One Finger Lakes winery owner reported that they bought a whole box of bottled maple syrup from a producer who stopped by one day. The winery promptly sold all the syrup to their winery customers, but then never saw the maple producer again. They did not carry maple syrup for several months because no one approached them to restock.

Pricing wholesale maple syrup is as much an art as a science. On one hand, it is appropriate to explain the usual retail prices for your product, then negotiate a wholesale price with the buyer. On the other hand, you can simply price wholesale 35 - 45% above your cost of production; retail would be 65 - 75% above your cost of production (Myott, 2002). Many maple producers compare what other producers are charging by simply obtaining their price sheets.

Your list of possible wholesale contacts can include locally owned restaurants, wineries, cider mills, nurseries, farm markets, bulk food stores, bakeries, candy makers, ice cream shops, and regional tourist stores, and other hospitality businesses. Read Sections 2.1 and 2.2 of this guide to learn more about approaching boutiques, gift shops, and restaurants with your wholesale maple products.

## References

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Nut harvesting and storage will make or break the marketability of your product.

## Section 1.3

### Nuts and berries

Whether for a plant-based diet, set out to attract wildlife, or as an important part of old-fashioned recipes, nuts and forest berries have immense potential for marketing and income. Anyone growing these edible plants, or lucky enough to have a number of nut and berry trees and shrubs already on their property, will likely sell out of their seasonal harvest every year for years to come. It is hard to overestimate the demand, once consumers get a little education provided by you as a forest crop entrepreneur.

Nuts include shagbark hickory, shell bark hickory, and pignut hickory (for wildlife only), black walnut, chestnuts, acorns, hazelnuts, and beechnuts. Most of these nuts grow naturally in New York's forests; others are grown in nut orchards as cultivated varieties. The Northern Nut Growers Association

is the most helpful organization in New York for information about nut growing.

Nuts are a high-energy food for wildlife and humans. Natural oils make nuts appealing to people who are looking for healthy, nutritionally sound, and unusually tasty ingredients. With some harvest care, good storage practices, and a small

amount of marketing effort, these nuts will provide enjoyment for you and your customers.

Forest-based berry crops, like blackberries, serviceberries, lignonberries, elderberries, blueberries, and wild plums are not consistently regarded by agriculture researchers as important crops (Finn, 1999). However, forest owners and farmers can diversify or supplement income by cultivating and marketing the unique character of these berries – taste, health benefits, and local identity.

#### Post harvest handling of nuts and berries

Nut harvesting and storage will make or break the marketability of your product. It takes good timing and a bit of effort to transform the nuts dropping from a tree into a marketable product.

Hickory nuts should be removed from their pod and sold either in the shell or shelled. The husk usually breaks away from the shell cleanly, leaving a marble-sized nut. This nut then needs to be cracked open to pick out the edible nutmeat. Place husked hickory nuts in a pail of water to sort off the ones that float – these do not have filled kernels due to weevils or poor growing conditions. A sharp rap with a hammer on the curved shoulder of the nut will break the shell without ruining the edible nutmeat parts. Be aware that it takes a lot of effort to extract a marketable amount of hickory nutmeats. If you market hickory nuts, provide cracking instructions or invest in bench top devices that are designed for repeated nut cracking.

Black walnuts can be sold unprocessed, in the shell, or in edible form. If intended for consumption, walnuts should be husked immediately after harvest. The husk will stain your skin, so wear protective gloves to de-husk the fresh walnut. For large quantities, use a heel board or walnut husker. Rinse the walnut in its shell, then use the float test to remove undesirable walnuts. After sorting, dry the walnuts in the shell for a month by placing them in layers with good air circulation, protected from rodents and direct light (Janssen, 1994; Roper, 2003). To crack open a walnut, set it on a brick or stone and strike it on the end with a hammer. Nipper-type wire cutters will make extraction of the walnut meat easier than picking it out. Soaking the shelled walnuts in water for 1 –2 hours, draining, and sealing in a container for 10 hours can help make the shelling easier.

Beechnuts and hazelnuts are smaller, and are often sold in the shell. However, both have nutmeats that readily fall from the shell with a light cracking.

Acorns are edible, and make an interesting snack or wildlife offering. Harvest and collect acorns (in competition with local squirrels) when they are fully sized and begin dropping from the tree. White oak acorns are often low in tannin content and can be shelled and eaten raw or roasted. Acorns from red oak trees must have the tannin leached out to eliminate the bitter taste. Collect and shell red oak acorns, and boil them in plenty of water, then drain and refresh the boiling water repeatedly until the water no longer turns brown. Then, the acorns can be roasted, candied, dried and crushed, or ground into a high-fat flour (Peterson, 1977).

Nuts are best stored in a very cold or frozen state. Due to their high oil content and desirability by insects and rodents, infestations are common. In a freezer, the nuts stay fresh for a year or



more. They need to be packaged in small quantities in airtight containers to prevent odor and flavor contamination from other foods. Make sure your buyers are aware of the need for proper nut storage.

Most forest-grown nuts can be roasted to improve the flavor. Spread the nuts on a tray and roast them at 250 degrees F until they are dry without becoming brown. Roasted nuts can be canned or frozen, following USDA guidelines.

All forest berries are highly perishable. They must be refrigerated immediately upon cleaning, then kept under high humidity. If being sold fresh, they should be kept as cool as possible. Forest berries of all types can be dried or processed into jam, jellies, syrup, pie filling, or steeped as teas.

### Packaging nuts and berries

There is an endless variety of ways you can package forest-grown nuts and berries. Due to the unique nature of these food products and the fact that few people are familiar with them, it is especially important to use clear glass or plastic containers or bags. Your customers will want to see the product right through the packaging, so they are not surprised when they open it. Here are some packaging ideas:

- Jams and jellies – Process the berries singly or as wild blends, infused with nature's flavors.
- Packaged nuts – Forest nuts can be packaged singly or as nut mixes, intended for inclusion in recipes or eaten right out of the package as a nutritious snack. A forest trail mix of berries and nuts will be appealing to hikers and outdoor enthusiasts.
- Special bird feed – Nearly all the birdseed sold in New York is from non-native sources. People interested in providing birds with the heartiest natural foods will

love a bag or two of native nuts and dried berries. This food was what birds were eating long before sunflower or cracked corn became cheap and convenient. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on birdseed each year, so there is a market for gourmet blends. Hickory nut hulls with some of the nutmeats still clinging to the edges make an attractive bird food.

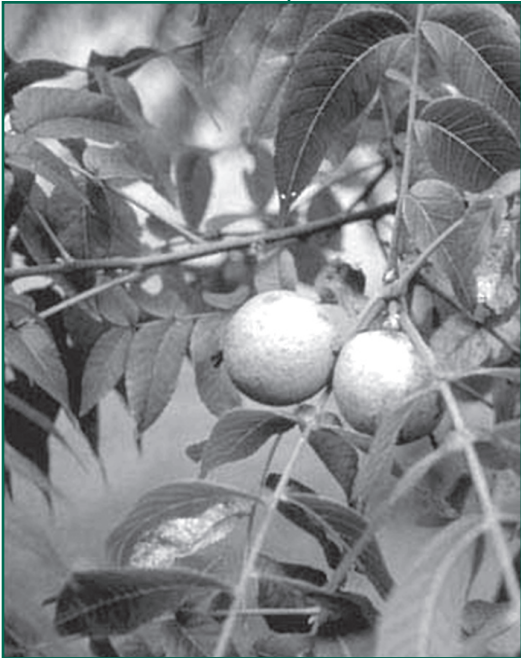
- Indigenous foods – Native Americans survived for thousands of years on the nuts and berries we now overlook. People interested in the foods of indigenous people will be attracted to such staples as acorn flour, pemmican, and other native foods.

### Selling points

- Health – Hickory nuts and walnuts are known to have high levels of omega-3 fatty acids – much more per serving than peanuts or cashews. They contain phytochemicals like plant sterols and flavonoids, which are beneficial to cardiovascular health, and antioxidants like Vitamin E (Kendall, 1997). Wild nuts contain levels of fat, protein and carbohydrates that are comparable to meat. Although the calorie content is high for most nuts, each calorie is accompanied by excellent nutrition. Nuts should be eaten in moderation.
- Flavor/nostalgia – Hickory nuts and walnuts have a sweet, woody and delicate flavor, distinct from store-bought nuts that are bred for their ease of processing. They will impart a subtle, but distinct flavor to any recipe calling for nutmeats. Acorn flavors vary, but are mildly nutty, with a soft texture. Old-time recipes regularly called for chestnuts and hickories when these nuts were commonly gathered for winter storage and eating. Many cooks seek ingredients that replicate these old-fashioned flavors.
- Unique – Acorns and hickories are not commonly found in stores because the commercial food industry lacks the research and equipment to harvest and process these food efficiently. Forest-owning entrepreneurs can take advantage of this niche by providing families with a special ingredient for their meals.
- Wildlife food – Whole shelled nuts, cull nuts and nut scraps can be packaged as an important wildlife food. Nearly all native

wildlife rely on the excellent, high-energy nutrition found in hickories, walnuts, acorns, and beechnuts. Since many of these trees have been removed from our forests through blights or the commercial value of the wood, many wildlife lovers will want to provide the food that you are selling. Nuts containing larvae are a bonus for birds and other wildlife. Some wildlife food retailers sell 10 lb.

bags of unshelled walnuts for \$16.00.



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- Natural proteins for plant-based diets – For people who seek to gain some or all of their nutrition from plant-based sources, mature nuts are an excellent source. Hazelnuts, hickories, and walnuts have high levels of dietary starch, protein, fat, fiber, and several good vitamins. Nuts are virtually cholesterol free.

- Connected to indigenous cultures – Nuts were an important winter food for native cultures<sup>1</sup>. People seek-

ing to revive or reenact lifestyles of native people would need to rely on these natural sources of energy.

## Keys to marketing

The key to marketing forest-derived nuts and berries is consistent quality. Chefs, small scale food processors, and retail customers will expect that your produce will be offered in a relatively consistent, unblemished form every time. This aspect of marketing has already been a challenge to some farm operators who have arranged direct delivery to local restaurants. Restaurateurs and retail customers will not accept a few off-flavor berries or undersized nuts in a batch. They will find another source or substitute that offers consistency, despite not being a local source.

Obviously, nuts and berries are seasonal, and that is an intrinsic understanding in the locally produced food marketplace. Preservation methods such as freezing or drying change the nature of the product. Find out if your customer would accept a stored, and somewhat altered, version of your nuts or berries during the off-season by asking for their preferences. Person-to-person communication and product

education help make special forest product marketing unique. One of the key marketing phrases in agroforestry is, "I will try to meet your needs."

Pricing forest-derived nuts and berries is highly variable. Nuts are sold by the pound (higher for shelled, lower for unshelled) and berries are often sold by volume - in half-pints, pints and quarts. If you are distributing a variety of such food products, be ready to convert one unit to another easily (e.g. 8 oz. of acorns = 1/2 pint).

White oak acorns - \$5-7/lb. unshelled; \$10-15/lb. shelled

Hickory nuts - \$3-5/lb. unshelled; \$15-30/lb. shelled

Hazelnuts - \$3-5/lb. unshelled; \$8-10/lb. shelled

Walnuts - \$2-4/lb. unshelled; \$6-10/lb. shelled

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<sup>1</sup>According to the American Heritage Dictionary, the word 'hickory' is derived from the Algonquian word "pocohiquara," a useful oily fluid pressed from pounded hickory nuts.



## Section 1.4

# Marketing American ginseng and other forest botanicals

American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolium*) is one of dozens of forest-derived herbs with purported medicinal qualities. Collecting forest plants for medicines and/or nutrition is one of the oldest uses of forests. Now, forest owners can grow their own medicinal plants, or on a larger scale, supply quantities to herbalists and other buyers. This section relates specifically to marketing a purposefully cultivated crop, rather than a wild-collected product.

There is little direct understanding of certain agroforestry markets (Gold, et. al., 2004) and forest-grown herbs is one of the least analyzed agroforestry markets. More and more landowners are growing herbs for their own use, and some are stretching their enterprise for sale to specific buyers. Other landowners have learned which herbs grow naturally on their land and are using them for medicinal and nutritive purposes.

The collection of valuable herbs from the wild, a form of wildcrafting, can lead to exploitation for many threatened plants in New York. Gathering bunches of wild herbs wherever you find them and selling them as a sustainably-harvested resource is completely inappropriate, and for some plants, illegal. Plants may not be harvested from State Land in New York. Part of the marketability of a forest-grown herb is ensuring its continuance in nature through cultivation in a similar ecological area to its native habitat. The real message you want to send is, "This herb is woods-grown. As much is planted and growing as is harvested."

Before growing forest botanicals for sale, you should first learn about and respect the underlying rationale for utilizing forest herbs. If you are skeptical of herbal remedies, it will be difficult for you to market the crop you grow. As with any specialty product, knowledge of how an herb is prepared and used properly is key. For example, pale jewelweed (*Impatiens pallida*) grows in moist forests and can be used to relieve skin irritations from nettle and poison ivy. If you were propagating it for sale, what questions could you answer about it?

Populations of forest botanicals are very fragile and take years to establish. If you are interested in growing crops like American ginseng or goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*), you will be getting into it for years to come. It often takes 5 - 10 years to produce the first crop, and that's only with diligent care during the intervening years.

In this section, American ginseng is used as the model herb for marketing in New York. Marketing requirements for ginseng are well-understood and regulated. For other herbs, like cohosh, ginger, Echinacea, bergamot, and bloodroot, markets are very restrictive. Supplies of medicinal herbs are already adequate for many buyers (Davis, 2001).

### Marketing American ginseng<sup>2</sup>

Few commodities from the United States have as long a marketing history as American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolium*). In the early 1700's fur trappers and traders paid Native Americans 25 cents per pound for dried ginseng roots and by 1850 the United States Department of Commerce recorded ginseng root prices of 58 cents per pound. Today wild or high quality wild simulated ginseng roots sell for prices ranging from \$200 to more than \$1,000 per pound dry weight. In order to understand ginseng marketing, it is necessary to become familiar with the various types of ginseng that are grown in an agroforestry system. There are three forms of ginseng grown for sale in New York: wild simulated, woods-cultivated, and organic woods-grown.

Wild simulated ginseng (WSG) is an intentionally planted ginseng that cannot be distinguished from truly wild ginseng. Wild ginseng is a protected plant in NY State that is highly regulated by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. Although all types of cultivated ginseng are not subject to these regulations, woodland ginseng growers should obtain and become familiar with the DEC regulations regarding wild ginseng. Most long term growers of wild simulated ginseng try to sell their crop as truly "wild" in order to receive the highest prices. If growers call their ginseng "wild," they must adhere to the rules and regulations (NY Environmental Conservation Law, § 3-0301, 9-0105, 9-1503).

The rules for harvesting American ginseng include a specific harvest season (September 1 - November 30), sale season (September 1 - December 31 for green, September 16

Populations of forest botanicals are very fragile and take years to establish.



- March 31 for dry), official weighing and certification of the roots, documentation of where the roots were dug, and specific regulations restricting sales out of NY State to registered dealers only. No ginseng may be harvested from any State Lands (6 NYCRR 190.8g).

WSG is generally grown for a period of at least 9 to 12 years or longer, unless it is being marketed as transplants. In general, the older the ginseng roots, the more valuable they are. WSG roots less than 5 years old have very little value except as transplant stock. Five to 15 year old WSG may sell for prices ranging from less than \$50 per dried pound to as much as \$200 per pound depending upon very subjective appearance characteristics. Fifteen to 25 year old WSG may sell for prices ranging from \$200 to \$1,000 per pound. WSG roots older than 25 years usually sell for at least \$500 to \$1500 per pound.

Woods Cultivated Ginseng (WCG) is grown in a forest utilizing shade provided by the existing forest canopy. It is planted in tilled beds that may or may not have had fertilizers or soil amendments added. WCG may or may not have been sprayed with pesticides. WCG is usually grown for a period of 6 to 8 years unless it is being marketed as transplants. WCG 6 to 8 years old sells for prices ranging from \$25 to \$100 per pound.

Organic Wood's Grown Ginseng (OWGG) may be wild simulated or woods cultivated, but must be grown according to certified USDA organic standards. Currently there does not appear to be a premium paid for "organic" ginseng, perhaps because many buyers assume it is "organic" in general. Prices paid for OWGG are similar to WCG.

There are two other plants that are also called ginseng, but are not generally grown in American agroforestry systems. Asian or Korean ginseng (*Panax ginseng*) is grown in China and Korea. Siberian ginseng (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*) is of little value in general, because it is not ginseng and does not contain the chemical compounds associated with ginseng's medicinal uses.

There are a variety of marketable forms of American ginseng. It is most commonly sold as whole, dried roots but it may also be sold as "green" or "fresh" whole roots. In general, freshly harvested ginseng roots weigh about three times as much as the same roots would weigh when dried, consequently they sell for about one third of the price of dried roots.

Ginseng seed is also sold as either "green", which means freshly harvested or "stratified", which is seed that has been carefully stored for a year in most cases. Because of high perishability and rather exacting handling and storage requirements, almost all ginseng seed that is sold is sold as pre-stratified "ready to plant" seed. Freshly harvested ginseng seed that is planted in the fall of the same year it is harvested will not germinate the following spring; rather, it germinates the spring of the second year after planting. Stratified seed is also planted in the fall and will germinate the following spring.



Ginseng rootlets are sold as one-year, two-year, three-year, or four-year old and even older transplants. The rootlets may be WSG, WCG or OWGG. Prices paid for one or two year old rootlets range from 25 to 50 cents each to \$1.00 each for three or four year old to as much as \$5.00 each for 5 or 6 year old rootlets depending upon size and other subjective appearance characteristics.

Ginseng tea, extracts, capsules, berry juice, soaps, cosmetics, wine and powder are all "value added" products as are products such as honey, candy or maple products that have ginseng added in some form. There are complex rules and regulations formulated by the NYS Department of Ag and Markets regarding production and sales of value added products that need to be carefully investigated before producing any of these products. Value added products may be the most profitable way to market ginseng. Consider that a single container of 60, 250 milligram, pure ginseng capsules may sell for as much as \$30. That product actually contains only 15 grams or about one half ounce of dried ginseng which translates into a price of more than \$1,000 per pound. To learn about regulations and licenses

pertaining to a specific value-added product, call Cornell Cooperative Extension in your county.

The NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) compiles an annual list of permitted ginseng dealers. Any ginseng sold across state borders must be first sold to a licensed dealer. To obtain a copy of this list, contact the DEC ginseng coordinator in Albany at NYS DEC Division of Lands & Forests, 625 Broadway, Albany, NY 12233-4253; (518) 402-9425. This list is not currently published online.

Ginseng is held in high esteem by Asian peoples, primarily Chinese and Koreans. Any major metropolitan area that has a large Asian community will have people interested in buying ginseng. Even small communities that have a single Chinese restaurant can often be a source of potential buyers. Chinese or American herbal practitioners or acupuncture practitioners often use ginseng in their practices. Colleges or universities with Asian students, farmer's markets, health food stores, and local agricultural festivals also may provide potential sales outlets.

### **Marketing other forest grown herbal products**

Collecting or cultivating forest botanicals for sale is a long-term procedure that requires in-depth knowledge of botany, and well-honed systems of harvesting, drying, and storing the plant materials. It is by no means a route to quick riches. The publication, *Income Opportunities in Special Forest Products: Self-Help Suggestions for Rural Entrepreneurs* (Thomas & Schumann, 1993) contains a number of important tips for marketing forest botanicals, reprinted in part here:

- The market for the harvest and sale of wild-crafted fresh greens is more limited. For one reason, fresh wild greens are delicate, far more so than mushrooms, for example. They crush easily, just by their own weight, and they wilt easily. Just 2 hours in the hot sun will ruin them . . . Plant identification is more difficult than for other edibles (like morel mushrooms, for example). The harvester must have a very good knowledge of botany to be trained to forage for edible greens. Just one error with greens, such as mistakenly getting hemlock leaves into a batch of edible greens, would create enormous difficulty for the entire "wild edibles" industry.
- There are two primary markets for fresh [botanical food] products—gourmet restaurants and their associated food service operations, and grocery stores. Grocery stores would be the more dependable market, since restaurants are an "iffy" market and sell wild edibles

as a fad or novelty as much as anything else. However, the economy does have a great effect on people's eating habits, and caution is advised in beginning a business related to cooking greens. A major education effort might be necessary as a part of any marketing area. The secondary market is direct mail order to individuals.

- Medicinal plants for the herbal and alternative health care markets are marketed primarily through small regional botanical or herb buying houses that process and package the plant parts for final processors or the retail market. The annual *Whole Foods Source Directory* lists a number of different wholesalers, retailers, and manufacturers for each herb and spice as well as sources for warehousing and transportation. These firms typically publish buying and selling catalogs that list the types and quantities of plant materials they purchase and sell. The firms provide guidelines on the proper collection and shipping methods to use.
- Marketing of medicinal plants is characterized by small start-up firms. The popularity of herbal and alternative health care products makes new product market entry relatively easy. Producers who have sufficient quantities of plant material that has been harvested correctly to produce a consistent, high-quality product may be able to produce a direct retail product with processing and packaging assistance. Producers marketing medicinal plants need to familiarize themselves thoroughly with Federal and State regulations regarding health care products. In general, if the product is marketed only as a food substance/nutritional supplement, with no medical claims, then the product will not have to undergo the extensive testing and certification required of pharmaceutical drugs.
- Pharmaceutical firms that produce prescription and over-the-counter drugs are another market for certain medicinal plants. While many biologically based drugs have been replaced with synthetic drugs, there are still drugs produced from cultivated or wild medicinal plants.
- The key to success in marketing herbs for a rural area will be the development of centralized processing facilities to add value to the products locally. Nearly all botanicals need to be processed to some degree once they are harvested. This may involve washing, drying, grading, sifting, etc. Pro-



cessing leaves, roots, and bark from a field harvest condition into a usable product for direct consumption (as foods or medicinals) or further manufacture (by pharmaceutical companies, for example) is critical to a successful venture in these products.

Prospective forest-based herb growers in New York should spend plenty of time developing an understanding and appreciation for the unique growing conditions and potential medicinal properties of forest herbs. If you are skeptical of herbal products for nutrition, flavoring, or medicinal benefits, you should pursue a different venture. Forest botanical marketing comes in large part from a commitment to the benefits of natural supplements.

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<sup>2</sup>This section was written primarily by Bob Beyfuss, Extension Ginseng Specialist, (518) 622-9820.

## Section 1.5

### Landscaping and habitat restoration/ reforestation products

One of the most exciting agroforestry opportunities is in providing plant material for small- and large-scale landscaping projects. Native plant material is now recognized as an important component of landscaping in New York. Native plants provide numerous benefits for property owners, including hardiness, disease resistance, beauty, seasonal flowering, high wildlife value, and adaptiveness to various soil conditions. Many rural property owners seek native trees and shrubs specifically for their home landscapes.

Surprisingly, native trees and shrubs can be difficult to find through conventional horticulture retailers. In Michigan, a landscaping customer once drove 150 miles to obtain three small native hickory trees to improve the ecological value of his lawn. He simply wanted transplantable native nut trees, rather than typical nursery trees.

Even though consumer interest in native plants is high, wholesale nurseries tend to propagate “tried and true” species and their horticultural varieties. As a result, the retail yard of many nurseries and home centers stock a relatively short list of landscape plant species, many of which are non-native and somewhat unremarkable.

As a forest-based hobbyist or entrepreneur, you will have to choose your production method and palette of species that you wish to cultivate. To optimize the sustainability of existing populations, plan on propagating these through seeds, cuttings, and/or grafting, rather than digging them up from the forest. They can be cultured in pots, as field-grown transplants, or transplants cultivated in the forest understory. Keep records of where you have obtained your original plant material, in the event you propagate an individual with

unusual characteristics or traits. For example, you might find an oak that can tolerate wetter conditions. Cuttings from such a tree will yield identical transplants.

#### Post harvest handling of seed and transplants

Native trees and shrubs are best handled when dormant (November – March). Unless you have special digging and transport equipment, plan on selling native trees and shrubs “bare root”. This means the plant is fully dormant and does not have a soil-laden root ball. Each tree is dug up carefully and any mineral soils are removed. The plant is then packed in a very cool location with clean, damp sawdust around the exposed roots. Native plants can also be cultured in nursery pots small enough for one person to handle.

A year before digging up field- or shade-grown trees or shrubs, tag each plant with a somewhat permanent tag (metal or UV-resistant plastic) that clearly indicates the species. Young, dormant hardwood seedlings are difficult to distinguish from each other. Prune away a portion of the branches and also prune the root zone with a sharp spade. This will cause the tree or shrub to develop more compact branches and roots, making post-harvest handling much easier (Grafton, et. al., 1991).

Potted native plants must be sold in containers of adequate size, usually 1, 2, or 5-gallon containers. Customers will expect the containers to be clean, free of weeds or surprise vegetation, and of a similar style used in the commercial nursery trade. Old buckets, milk containers, or pails may be used during propagation, but many customers will be reluctant to buy material that is packaged unprofessionally. Trees that normally have extensive taproots, such as hickories and oaks, may not thrive in containers, and may need to be sold bare-root.

Forest-based trees and shrubs or plants cultivated as a “seed orchard” provide seeds, a living cache of energy and genetics surrounded by a durable shell. These seeds can be collected and sold or propagated, as long as they are harvested and stored properly (Yoder, 2001). If you are going to collect seeds from native plants, you may have to wait two or more years to market your first seed products. This is the time it takes to experiment with different harvesting and storage methods, and to build up a marketable inventory of seeds<sup>3</sup>.

Native plant material is now recognized as an important component of landscaping in New York.



The post-harvest storage requirements of different species of native plants, shrubs, and trees varies, yet plenty of information is available through forestry, horticulture, and agriculture Cooperative Extension publications. In general, all collected seed must be sorted, cleaned, stored in a moisture- and temperature-controlled area, and often stratified (stored at very cool temperatures for a designated period). If you intend to market the seed, you must keep careful records of species, and monitor your storage systems carefully. Keep records of the process.

For example, say you wanted to collect oak tree seeds (acorns). Acorns should be collected in October, and tested for likely viability by placing them loosely in a bucket of water. Non-viable acorns will float readily (within an hour). Store acorns in a cool location through the winter for spring planting. Avoid storing them in a great mass, which can begin a spontaneous heating or germination problem (Rasmussen et. al., 2003). Once winter is finished, count out 100 acorns and plant them in marked spots. Record the number that germinates that spring to gain a sense of your current skill at seed collection and storage.

### Keys to marketing live plant products

Anyone who intends to market native plants, trees, and shrubs should have a wide selection ready for customers. Since diversity is a key to natural ecological systems, you should have at least 10 different species available in each plant type (at least 10 different trees species, 10 different shrubs, and so on.)

Native plant retailers must know their products very well. Read extensively about each plant you are propagating and be ready to educate your customer about the merits and deficiencies of each. Know the plants' soil preferences, the native communities, what birds associate with each species, possible diseases or insect pests, size, and seasonal changes. There are many books on this topic, including *Native Plants in the Creation of Backyard, Schoolyard and Park Habitat Areas* by Marci Mowery (1997).

You should have seeding, storage, and transplanting tips available in written form to go along with your product. This helps to

ensure proper handling and gives the customer added confidence in your product. Such instructions are rarely provided for nursery stock sold in chain retailers.

### Legal and regulatory statutes

If you grow plants and trees for sale, even on a small, informal scale, you must obtain a nursery license in New York State. Call the Division of Plant Industry at the Department of Agriculture and Markets – (518) 457-2087. Ask for the Application for Registration and Certification as a Plant Grower. Registration is required to propagate, grow or cultivate nursery stock for the purpose of distribution or sale. Registration as a native plant nursery is a condition of conducting business in New York State. This license mandates an inspection of your nursery structures, buildings, storage, and other areas prior to the processing of the application. Repeat inspections are conducted every two years for renewals. The inspector looks for proper sanitation, pest control, disease control, and noxious weed control measures. In other states, check with a commercial horticulture educator with the Cooperative Extension service, or contact the state agriculture department.

Environmental conservation laws protect many native trees and shrubs in New York State. Like herbs, part of the marketability of native plants is the sustainable ways in which they are obtained. Propagating native plants in nurseries can reduce the pressure of harvesting the same plants from its native habitat.

### Selling points for native plants

- Native trees, shrubs, and plants are becoming increasingly popular as environmental awareness and personal responsibility for en-



US Fish and Wildlife



vironmental quality increases. Native plants provide property owners with vegetation that is well adapted to the region's ecology and climate. They seldom cause weed problems. Many customers will go out of their way to obtain such an ecologically responsible resource.

- Locally grown native transplants represent an improvement over the more common practice of wholesale nursery stock, often grown in different climate zones.
- Native plants are adaptable to both small and large landscapes. A small cluster of native plants in a suburban yard provides a micro-environment that is both beautiful, environmentally beneficial, and usually easy to care for. Extensive plantings on large properties can make a large-scale native plant zone.
- More than any other trait, native plants are prized for their ability to attract wildlife, especially birds. Native food-producing shrubs and trees, such as viburnums, cedars, oaks, maples, birches, and alders are frequently touted for their high wildlife value. Native wildflowers provide important sources of food for butterflies, hummingbirds, and other appealing creatures.
- Other benefits for your customers include
  - resistance to diseases
  - uniquely beautiful characteristics (like the vibrant red of Virginia creeper vine in the fall)
  - seasonal flowering
  - adapted to various local soil conditions

Plant materials are most commonly sold through a retail nursery, catalog, or at home centers. Some native plant marketers will be able to establish a relationship with the small but popular independent garden centers in their community. Do not expect to sell through chain home centers, mega-nurseries, or grocery stores.

Many county Soil and Water Conservation District offices hold annual tree and shrub seedling sales, as does the NYS Department of Conservation through their Tree Nursery in Saratoga Springs, NY. These arrangements are well established, but it might be worth a call to see if your stock of plants and seeds would be of interest, especially on a regional basis (Catskill, Niagara Frontier, etc.). Find out which native species customers request, but are usually unavailable elsewhere.

## Pricing and packaging native plant materials

Native plant materials are usually sold per unit (one tree or plant) or in packs of 10, 25, or 50 units. The price you establish should be reasonable and competitive. You may increase the price for plants that are larger or more unique. Visit nurseries, obtain native plant catalogs, and keep track of your own expenses to determine a good price for your product. Since your customers will consider you to be more informal and friendly, devious business practices like "bait and switch" will not work and your reputation will suffer.

Containerized plants and bare root transplants are two different products. The potted plants are more valuable due to the increased flexibility in planting times and ease of transplant.

Competition for your burgeoning native plant nursery will come mainly from New York's substantial landscaping industry, area garden centers, home centers, and others. You will be marketing to a "niche" audience – not to everyone who buys plants in your community. This group of plant buyers usually cannot find enough native plants to satisfy their needs or they make compromises by purchasing non-native plants that are naturalized. You will win them over by offering a quality version of live native plants and seeds.

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Decorative items like dry wreaths and picture frames are displayed year-round at gift shops and country markets.

## Section 1.6

### Specialty wood products, decoratives, flavorings, and weaving materials

For years, proponents of agroforestry have speculated on the marketability of various specialty wood products for decoration, cooking, and other crafts. Research about markets for woody florals (decorative stems) from the University of Nebraska, and from red cedar buyers in Missouri, suggests that with research and an understanding of buyers' needs, specialty wood products have market potential (Gold, et. al., 2004). In other words, you will need to spend time learning about and developing a relationship with potential buyers. This section provides details about handling and marketing unusual forest products that are used in the home and around the yard.

As described in Section 1.0, many different non-timber forest products can be collected from your woodlot. One fundamental principle of collecting forest products is to maintain a sustainable production system. For example, willow used as erosion control around a stream can also be harvested as a decorative or weaving material. However, the willow should be cut in a manner that does not jeopardize its erosion control or stream protection properties. A special planting of decorative willow would be a preferable production system.

It will be especially important for you to assure and be able to prove to your buyer or customer

that you are harvesting these natural products in a sustainable manner. Million-dollar retail outlets cannot possibly ensure that their products are truly naturally derived, with sensitivity to the ecology of the forest.

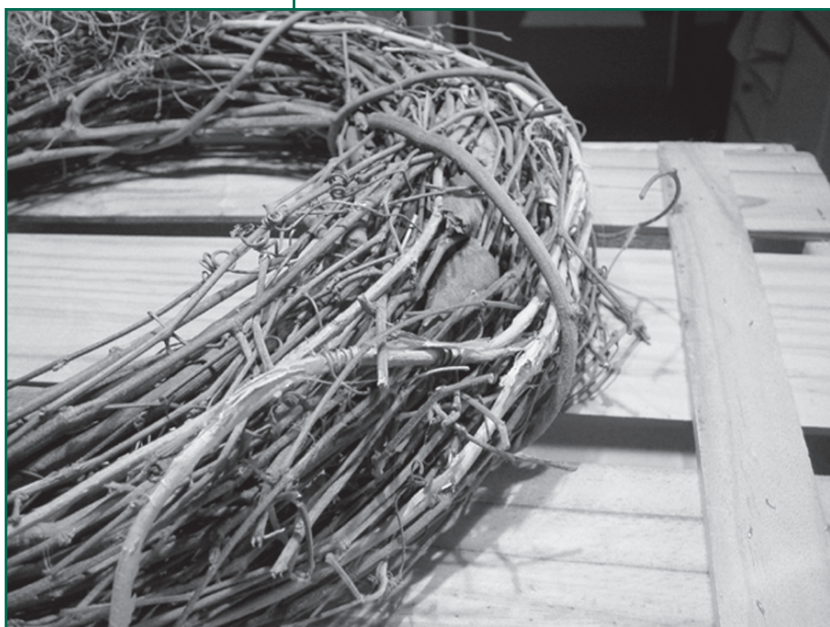
#### Forest grown decoratives

Once confined to the collection of pine boughs for holiday cheer, decorations derived from nature are now utilized year-round. Decorative items like dry wreaths and picture frames are displayed year-round at gift shops and country markets. Other products like greenery, floral objects, and scented crafts need to be replenished regularly or at least annually. Consider the array of natural decorative items currently popular:

- Grapevine wreaths and strands (\$4 - \$20)
- Birch log candleholders (\$5 - \$30)
- Rustic frames and furnishings (\$20 - \$50 or more)
- Forest-scented potpourri (\$1 - \$4 / lb.)
- Moss-covered stones in gardens (\$5 - \$20)
- Colored branches in floral bouquets (\$5 / doz.)
- Dried flowers (\$1 - \$5 / oz.)
- Cedar blocks (\$5 - \$10)
- Creek-polished stones in indoor waterfalls or in small gardens (\$4 - \$6/ lb.)
- Tree branch picture frames (\$10 - \$20)
- Nature-based ornaments for Christmas trees (\$2 - 20)

The possibilities are endless. Consider for example, a farm market vendor in southeast Michigan who always displays a large bowl of pine needles, small cones, twigs, and flower buds. He sells this forest-collected mix as a potpourri, perfect for the nearby apartment dwellers with little access to woodlots for \$1 per ounce. Every week, a fresh bowl of seasonally collected materials is available for farm market patrons to purchase. Some use the potpourri on their own homemade craft items. Having a dependable supply of this forest mix brings customers to his table for other farm items as well. The lesson here is that you might make an unusual product available, then let the customers decide how it will be used.

The craft and decorative industry in New York State is large and very competitive. Wholesale decoration suppliers from around the world provide all types of real and artificial items to floral shops, crafters, art supply stores, and other retail outlets. You are not going to compete with these suppliers on price or selection. Rather, you will need to find wholesale buyers who are interested in supporting local enterprises, and who value your service and the uniqueness of your products. If you are seeking to create a retail business for forest decoratives, you will need to carve out a small market and serve them consistently.



You will never attract everyone looking for natural decorations for their home or business – just the ones for whom the local, sustainable source and personal service are as important as price. Decide whether you are going to provide wholesale or retail sales, or both, ahead of time as it can be challenging to manage both at the same time.

Can't anyone just go into Michael's, Craft Factory, or JoAnn Fabrics and get these decorative items? Of course they can. The key to marketing these kinds of agroforestry items is remembering that you are not going to just sell a 'product.' Rather, you are selling quality, your skills as a woodlot owner, easy delivery, a piece of the local environment, education, and a relationship. This applies to many areas of niche marketing, but especially so with decorative items. Your personality and commitment to providing a buyer or a customer with the best of your woodlot will add momentum to your enterprise.

As a small-scale marketer, you will be filling a consumer need that large craft stores or Internet sales cannot – a personal relationship between buyer and seller. Since the days of small-town commerce are disappearing, you should work hard to cultivate honest working relationships with all your buyers or customers.

### Handling and packaging forest-collected decorative products

Pine, spruce, larch and fir cones need to be cleaned before using as a decoration. Bugs, debris, and dirt can ruin the look of a carefully harvested product. Devise a system for dipping and stirring the cones in a mild detergent / bleach solution or other convenient cleanser (Frogge, 2001). The cones do not need to be sterile, just clean.

Logs and branches are subject to splitting when



they are brought into dry homes, especially hickory, oak, basswood and birch, which have the highest shrinkage rates of our New York hardwoods. Of course, some decorative items look all the better with a "distressed" appearance. Allow the wood to dry outdoors first, and then

craft your decorative items from the most intact wood. If you make log-based craft items (candle holders, curtain rods, etc.) without accounting for moisture loss, your final products may not have the appealing soundness you thought it would. Vines should be kept in a cool and moist location to retain the flexibility of the long strands (Das, 2001). It is important to clean grapevines to rid them of insects and debris stuck in the vines.

Greenery – boughs, tips, and tops from evergreens – should be harvested very close to the time of sales. Branches cut before cold weather has hardened the foliage will turn brown and shed their needles. Keep these branches in a refrigerated, damp space to maintain optimal freshness (Lilley & Holmes, 1991). In the Northeast, these branches can sell for \$2 to \$5 per pound, depending on the species and condition.

The way in which you package your forest decoratives will depend on your buyer's wishes; this is one of your assets as a seller of natural decoratives. You may be able to negotiate the supply of a specific collection of natural items, exclusively for a particular buyer. For example, a florist may have a winter bouquet style that includes colored twigs, flat evergreen branches, and a twining grapevine. You can position yourself to provide pre-cut packets of these items, and even customize colors or the types of evergreen. Since it is unlikely that you will beat regional or national decoration and floral suppliers on price or selection, focus on service. Your "package" should highlight the fact that you will deliver a unique set of clean, high-quality natural materials. Consistency is going to be the most important part of your marketing efforts.

The selling points for forest-based decoratives includes the following:

- As a gatherer of decorative items, your commitment to sustainability is important. You can offer tours and explanations of your gathering activities, which should not pose a threat to the longevity of our natural resources.
- Decorative items gathered from local forests are unique. They represent the land and culture from where they are extracted, such as decoratives from the Adirondacks, the Catskills, or the Upper Susquehanna region.
- Local forest-derived decoratives can be customized to the needs of the buyer or the décor of a customer.
- Your forest decoration is a way for people to bring the natural world into their home. Even something simple like pine needle





potpourri gives city and suburban residents an enjoyable sense of the “great outdoors” indoors.

### Specialty wood products

Although lumber, firewood, and paper are the most commonly cited products derived directly from trees, woodland owners with a truly entrepreneurial spirit will recognize more specialty uses of the wood in trees, such as for weaving and flavoring. Markets for these products are very small and exist in the form of person-to-person service and communication. It will take a variety of methods to connect with buyers in the first place (Thomas & Schumann, 1993).

On the issue of sustainability, it would seem ecologically inappropriate to start harvesting forest trees for culinary or decorative purposes. The use of trees for specialty wood products involves removing trees designated in a forest stewardship plan for alternative purposes. Normally, such trees are left in the forest or used for firewood. In an agroforestry system, cull trees are harvested to forward the long-range goals of the forest owner. Cull trees used for specialty wood products should be selected by a trained forestry professional and removed in a way that causes no harm to residual trees.

### Packaging wood for cooking and aroma

Aromatic oils naturally present in wood can be infused in meats, fish, and vegetarian dishes, imparting a uniquely rustic flavor. Though often achieved by grilling, the wood or smoke flavor can be imparted through roasting, smoking, or any slow-cook method. Wood chips, chunks, or planks are usually soaked in water for 30 minutes prior to use, to increase the volatility of the oils as steam. Some of today’s fast-cooking techniques, like broiling or searing, do not accommodate the

infusion of smoke or woody flavors.

Species of trees suitable for flavoring and aroma cooking in New York include hickory, apple, oak, sugar maple, and cedar. Sizes and shapes of cooking wood range from baseball-sized chunks (\$10/bag), to smaller chips (\$5/bag), to grilling planks (\$5 - \$10) on which food like fish is cooked. You might find a customer who would prefer larger sized logs, so be ready to adapt your product accordingly. The idea is to provide personal service in marketing cooking wood, which large companies are less able to do.

Cooking wood is always sold as well-dried pieces. After felling cull trees identified for removal by a forestry professional, cut, split, or chunk the wood to dry more quickly. Use a drafty structure or a solar kiln to speed up passive drying. Amass as large an inventory of market-ready sizes and species as possible. The ability to offer choices or blends of different cooking woods will help your enterprise stand out from commercial-sized sellers.

Cooking wood should be stored in a low-humidity environment to keep it dry and pest or mold free. Package the cooking wood in paper, perforated plastic, or netting (onion bag-style) to provide good air circulation. Heavier chunks will tear through lightweight paper and some aromatic oils will disperse from smaller chips in drafty packaging, so adjust the packaging accordingly. Inside the bag, the customer should find a clean, dry, pest free cooking wood product, complete with instructions for use, recipes, and disposal instructions after it is used up. Like any other forest-derived food product, your cooking wood needs to be of consistently high quality. Pay special attention to the problems of mildew and insect contamination. Questionable pieces cannot be made to look good and should be discarded to avoid problems in your drying area.

As wood dries, it loses a substantial amount of weight. A label might become inaccurate if the wood is packaged too early. The weight of dry wood can vary up to 10 percent because dry wood will absorb and release moisture depending on location. Express your package measurements in volume (cubic feet or inches) or dry weight. Customers will be reluctant to accept a product that weighs less than the stated mass on the label.

The selling points for locally produced cooking wood includes the following:

- Cooking wood adds unique flavor with no extra calories, fat, or sodium.
- The essence of flavor wood is best described as “rustic,” harkening back to older days when wood fires were used to



cook meals, indoors and out.

- The chunks and chips are easy to store and use, requiring very little preparation.
- Cooking wood is adaptable to propane grills, charcoal grills, ovens, crockpots, or campfire cooking.
- If the aroma is appealing to the individual, cooking wood chips can be used for pot-pourri as well.
- Of course, cooking wood is “all natural.”

Presently, cooking wood is sold wherever grills or grilling foods are sold - in supermarkets, specialty culinary stores, and department stores with backyard accessory sections. Since these products are easily shippable, Internet retailers of cooking equipment, kitchen supplies, and “country living” materials commonly sell cooking wood in small, expensive packages.

One opportunity for small-scale cooking wood producers is to partner with local farms that sell grass-fed meats. Many meat consumers are switching to meadow-raised products for health, environmental, and livestock quality-of-life reasons. Using locally-produced wood for grilling is a logical association with locally-produced meats.

A sideline market is to provide highly aromatic wood to suburban residents who use chimineas or deck fireplaces. Convenient packaging of aromatic firewood, dried, sized, and packaged for portable fireplaces has market potential. Backyard smokers are also popular, creating a potential market for specialty wood enterprises.

Gain exposure by introducing your unique

cooking wood product on a media food segment (such as during a television newscast), demonstrating how it is used. Provide a short paragraph to the media outlet, describing the scene and taste of food prepared with cooking wood, instead of conventional cooking. Make your information very descriptive, without being gushy. Portray it as an introduction of a new technique of cooking.

A sample release might read as follows:

*For immediate release - June 10, 2005*

*Tully, NY - As Syracuse homeowners fire up their outdoor grills this summer, they can treat themselves to an old-fashioned campfire taste with grill convenience. Otisco Hardwood Products is offering gourmet bags of cooking wood harvested from local, Upstate New York forests. Each bag has a mix of hickory, maple and oak chunks and is enough for 2 hours of grilling. Called “smokewood” in some places, anyone with a gas grill can impart the sweet, rustic taste to steaks, fish, or chicken. Cooking wood demonstrations are available upon request for restaurants, the media, and home appliance dealers.*

The current prices for cooking wood are extremely variable, from \$5.00 for a 200 cubic inch bag (about 3 pounds), to \$25.00 for two thin grilling planks. The best way to determine your price will be to compare what is currently available to your customers. Take notes on what you see at stores, and what you learn from making cold calls to other buyers. Promote your ability to provide specific types of cooking wood in custom forms for discriminating buyers. Otherwise, price your packages reasonably for the market you are in.

## **Packaging and marketing woodland weaving materials**

Willow, ash, oak, red dogwood, and grapevines are among many New York woodland items that are harvestable for weaving materials. Splints, which are long bands of wood, can be hand-pulled or shaven from freshly cut and debarked trunks and straight branches. These naturally flexible products are then woven into baskets, wreaths, and other decorative items. Creating weaving materials out of woodland trees and shrubs is very labor-intensive.

New York has artisans that make hand-woven products in the Adirondacks, Leatherstocking region, Catskill Mountains, and among native Iroquois. Most of these artisans collect or procure their own weaving materials as part of their craft, seeking special qualities. After identifying and discussing your product with



these artisans, you might be able to supply their needs. Since you are unlikely to find ready buyers for weaving materials, you will need to conduct your own market research in your region. Start by visiting shops where natural woven products are sold, then backtracking to find the craftspeople themselves.

Rather than meet the needs of existing potential buyers, some woodland owners will need to connect to or create new weaving markets. One such market is among suburban and urban residents who wish to start basket weaving or wreath making as a hobby. As a weaving material supplier, you would need to either partner with a competent weaving instructor or spend a few years developing the skills yourself. This is a highly specialized skill, but there are always people interested in learning how to make such items themselves. When it is time to buy supplies, they'll likely buy from you.

A second potential market is to introduce new or unusual woven products, such as willow hutches and fences. Willow hutches are small dome-shaped lodges made from very fresh willow branches. Recently-cut willow branches will often resprout when stuck into the ground. A hutch made from these branches will grow into a leafy, living shelter, suitable as a child's playhouse or garden feature. The



same willow branches can be woven into a long, straight fence as a windbreak or living privacy barrier.

Many other flexible woodland species like birch, poplar, pine, elm, and soft maple can be fabricated into dozens of other outdoor features, like arbors, trellises, fences, screens, and holiday ornamentation (swags and wreaths). Consumer trends continue to support

natural items in the home and as part of the exterior landscape. With a variety of large and small natural woven products, markets for woodland weaving products can be created or enlarged.

At this point, it should be more clear to you what steps to take if you are considering marketing unique woodland products. You may either explore the needs of potential buyers and meet them, or show potential buyers how your product meets their needs. Either way, once you begin to make connections, keep them secure with a quality product, with a commitment to sustainability, and with competent personal service.

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## Section 2

# Local, regional, and distant markets for agroforestry products

As noted in the Introduction, the markets for forest crops are relatively undefined. Producers are already selling these crops to buyers, but there is little information about how these arrangements are made (Gold et. al, 2004). Until agroforestry markets are better characterized, it is up to individual producers to forge their own channels, contacts, and marketing practices.

This section of the guide describes dozens of marketing strategies that apply to all special forest products, from neighbor contacts to introducing your product to a restaurant or small retailer. It is organized into three subsections, local, regional, and distant markets. Some marketing strategies apply to all three of these marketing areas.

No matter your market, there are several fundamental guiding principles for selling niche or special forest products:

- 1) Communicate regularly with your customer or buyer. Your niche product is satisfying a particular need or desire and

you should remain attentive to small changes in these desires.

- 2) Produce an agroforestry product with consistent and dependable quality. More than any other trait, buyers will constantly evaluate the quality of the goods they receive from you. Changes in quality will be noticed immediately, with lasting effect.

- 3) Keep on the lookout for new opportunities to diversify your special forest product line and your customer base. Circumstances within and beyond your control will change who is buying from you and what they are buying. Do not presume you will always sell the same thing to the same people for the life of your enterprise.

Because they are so important, these principles will be repeated and detailed in some of the marketing options in this section.

### References

Gold M.A, Godsey L.D., and Josiah S.J. (2004) Markets and marketing strategies for agroforestry specialty products in North America: New vistas in Agroforestry. Agroforestry Systems. vol. 61(1):371-384.

No matter your market, there are several fundamental guiding principles for selling niche or special forest products

Many small businesses use media releases to announce a new product or a special event.

## Section 2.1

### Local markets and promotions

Most people starting an agroforestry enterprise think about selling their products locally, usually on a retail or small wholesale basis. There are likely to be many potential outlets for these unique products in your community. Depending on your location, you might be able to meet your sales goals within 20 miles or so from where you live. If you need to travel further, regional or distant markets might be better suited.

#### Develop a product brochure

A product brochure is a cost-effective and acceptable way to introduce your product to potential buyers. It explains your enterprise and the value of your product. There are many types of brochure possibilities. You can make your brochure more attention grabbing by following these guidelines:

- Show images of your agroforestry Product in use, not just attractively packaged.
- Use some color without being gaudy.
- Include a teaser recipe or innovative way your product can be used.
- Include your contact information in several places.
- Three-fold brochures are standard; variations in shape and size will have some appeal.
- Use one main font style, and strive to use original graphics, rather than stock or clip-art graphics.
- Avoid using “sold out” on your price list; try “available for pre-order” to show your readiness to meet the buyers expectations.

#### Introduce product to neighbors and family members

If you are looking for “word-of-mouth” advertising for your forest product, provide a sample to the people who live around you who are likely to be forest owners themselves. Stop by or invite them over to show off your oyster mushroom crop or a special batch of maple syrup. Each of your neighbors has 300 acquaintances and friends (average), some of whom will likely have an interest in buying your product. Like your neighbors, your siblings, cousins, and older

relatives have their own networks of people who might be interested in your product.

#### News release to media

Many small businesses use media releases to announce a new product or a special event. Although your story may not always appear, it is worthwhile to prepare an intriguing announcement. From time to time, a reporter may follow up, or your forest-related story may be reserved for a future date. Your news release should be straightforward, containing only the most important facts. Ask a friend or family member to proofread your news release.

A sample release might read as follows:

*For immediate release - August 3, 2005  
Limestone, NY - In its third season of producing unique berries, Sutherland Farm will begin harvesting a “bumper crop” of elderberries and chokecherries in a few weeks. The heavy rain early in the summer, coupled with recent warm temperatures, has produced a heavy crop. “We expect the berries to be abundant this year, so we will make some extra syrups and jellies,” notes farm owner Gus Sutherland. The farm typically produces more than 100 quarts of alternative berries each year. Customers interested in inspecting the berries can contact Sutherland Farm at (716) 645-3322.*

#### Get to know your county extension agent and educators

One of the most productive relationships you can have as a forest crop grower is with your local Cooperative Extension office. As the lead educators about forestry, maple, and agroforestry issues in New York, Cornell Cooperative Extension personnel strive to enhance rural entrepreneurship in many parts of the state. If your county agent (or agriculture educator) knows about your business, they can direct a number of potential customers your way. Each Extension office is a little different as far as priorities and personalities go. Nonetheless, it is still the place where people call when they do not know whom else to call about farming, forestry, and alternative rural enterprises.

#### Offer a tour or open house of your woodland enterprise

Many small businesses invite the public to their shop to increase their visibility in the community. With plenty of advance notice, publicity, and invitations, you can draw a small crowd on almost any weekend or evening. Your entire property should be neat, clean, and professional looking to have the widest possible appeal. A visitor's book can establish an important mailing list and a new batch of potential customers.

## **Sell at farm market, winery, or U-pick farm**

People who patronize agriculture-based direct marketing outlets are often willing to support special forest product enterprises. Visit and inquire at farm stands, wineries, cider mills, u-pick fruit farms, maple syrup producers, and Christmas tree farms. Bring samples of your product and suggested pricing. Since these outlets can be seasonal, think about how you can spread the visibility of your products across several markets. For example, sell mushrooms through the summer at a farm market, and during the holidays at a u-cut Christmas tree farm. Most weekly farm markets in New York have a market manager, so find out who that person is, and what rules or policies might apply to the market. This is a good way to connect with customers in your community who already buy local products.



## **Participate in community festivals with an educational display**

In communities throughout New York, weekend festivals are held to celebrate a wide variety of local customs. Examples include air shows, community days, environmental festivals, firemen's carnivals, seasonal harvest festivals, and civic commemorations. Organizers of these events prefer to host a variety of displays and vendors. You can assemble an intriguing educational display about your special forest product to introduce crowds of people to your enterprise, even without selling anything directly. Interactive demonstrations make a big difference in drawing families to your corner of the event. For example, allow people to crack and eat hickory nuts for themselves, or teach them how to hook up a maple sap tube to a spile correctly.

## **Sell through a local hearth shop**

There are hundreds of hearth shops in New York. These are locally-owned stores that provide sales and service of wood stoves, fireplaces, and other wood-burning appliances. The customers who patronize these stores typically prefer a rustic or country décor and other natural items. Natural potpourri,

pine or spruce products, natural decorations, and even maple products have a place in such shops. You might at least find it a place to display your brochures. Make it clear to the owner of the hearth shop that the quality of your product meets or exceeds the high standard they already have. They will not want to lose a customer because of an inferior item you made and they agreed to sell. Look into consignment arrangements or set up a demonstration of your product in the store. If you need names of hearth shops, look in a community Pennysaver or in the telephone book.

## **Use product as fund raiser for local charity**

You can increase the visibility of your agroforestry product by arranging its sale as a fund raiser for a non-profit organization. Non-profits like churches, youth groups, nature centers, and historical societies are frequently seeking new and unique ways to raise money. Your product, such as containers of maple syrup, native landscape seedlings, or wildlife food mixes, can be offered at a discounted price. In turn, the non-profit can host a special sale or include your product in an existing sales fund raiser. Through this arrangement, you will establish good public relations, make your product more visible in the community, and help an organization important to you. Work directly with a fund raising committee, a development officer, or the director of the organization – whomever is authorized to make such arrangements. Start as far in advance as possible (maybe up to a year in advance) and deliver a product that meets or exceeds the expectations of the non-profit organization. Make your price expectations and arrangements in writing to prevent any misunderstandings that could damage your reputation.

## **Conduct a special sale or promotion for a club**

Member-based clubs, such as Audubon chapters or local rod and gun or conservation organizations, exist to provide a special service or opportunity to their members. As an agroforestry producer, you can offer a discount, or special product line, exclusively to members of these outdoor-oriented organizations. Such a promotion increases visibility and awareness of your product. It will likely generate some sales in the near term, and continued interest in the long term. Contact the governing board or officers of the organization well in advance of the promotion to make arrangements and answer their questions. Start by making a list of clubs in your community that might appreciate the kind of special forest product you produce.



### **Contact local institutional food service personnel or art instructors**

Public and private schools are increasingly called upon to serve quality food. Some schools have already begun serving food produced on local farms throughout New York State. Art instructors who use natural materials for classes may also be ready to develop a relationship with a local forest product supplier, rather than buying from art catalogs and distributors. Agroforestry products, such as maple syrup, greenery, grapevines, and decorative branches can find their way from your forest farm to your local schools. Day care centers may have similar interests in natural items from your woods. Like every other marketing approach, consistent quality and the right quantity are essential. The Farm-to-School web site [[www.farmtoschool.org](http://www.farmtoschool.org)] describes national and local efforts to link schools with farms. In New York, use Cornell Cooperative Extension's web site [<http://www.cce.cornell.edu/farmtoschool>].

### **Present your enterprise to civic groups**

Service organizations (Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, etc.) frequently seek speakers for their meetings. They want a speaker who can introduce a new concept, provide an update, or serve to intrigue and inspire club members. As an agroforestry producer, you have an opportunity to explain your unique product. Prepare a 15 to 20 minute presentation, usually with slides, or samples of your product. This is a good way to introduce your business to a receptive audience. Watch for meeting announcements and provide a description of your presentation to the club's education officer or speaker contact; they will contact you if they are interested. Keep your presentation educational. Minimize direct references to yourself as a sales person. If there is interest, members of the organization will usually inquire personally, after your presentation. Bring enough brochures to distribute to everyone at the meeting, if it is acceptable.

## Section 2.2

### Regional markets and promotions

Special forest product growers often live in rural communities where distance to key markets plays an important factor in connecting with buyers. Outside your community, your reputation is less well-known, and you will be interacting with buyers that may have other options. Your ability to serve your customer, and to provide consistent quality, becomes even more important when marketing beyond your community.

Two important regional markets for special forestry products are small retail establishments, and food and hospitality businesses, like restaurants and inns. Within an hour's drive, there are probably dozens of possible buyers in this category. You will not be selling your product to wineries or restaurants at a retail price. Rather, you will be wholesaling your product on a small scale. Thus, to generate the same level of income, you need more buyers, or to have each buyer purchasing in high volumes. Below are details pertaining to these markets, followed by other regional special forest product marketing strategies.

#### Selling special forest products to food and hospitality businesses

Two important markets for forest crop producers are sales to restaurants and to gourmet food processors. During the summer of 2004, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Schuyler County conducted a survey to determine what forest-based food products might have appeal for these buyers (Appendix 2). The survey generated useful comments from 25 independent commercial food, beverage, and hospitality businesses throughout New York. Many comments provided in the surveys were consistent with personal interviews that the investigators conducted with café owners, confectionary business, and winery owners.

Most of the respondents indicated that they already used maple syrup and nuts. Nuts were defined as native (hickory, walnut), but no distinction was made whether syrup products used were pure maple syrup, or pancake syrup that is mistakenly called "maple syrup." Gourmet mushrooms and minor berries were used by less than half the respondents, with even fewer reporting use of botanical or natural flavorings (Figure 1)

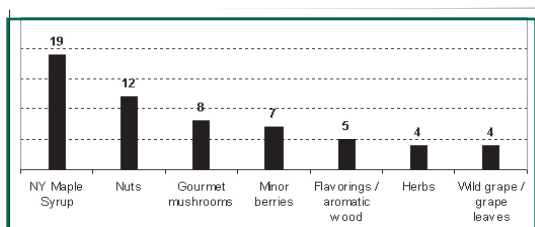


Figure 1: Do you purchase forest-based ingredients for your menu or processed items?

Maple syrup and native nuts drew the most interest out of a list of edible special forest products. Fifty percent more respondents indicated an interest in native nuts, mushrooms, grape leaf products, and berries than were currently using them. (Figure 2)

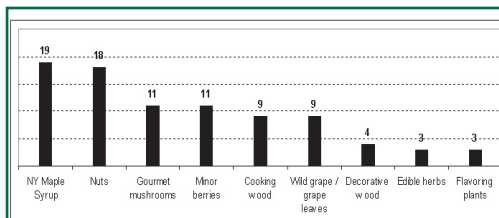


Figure 2: Which forest products would "fit" as part of your future retail or food product offerings?

When asked about which forest crop qualities were most important, the food establishment owners all named "consistent quality" as the most important attribute (Figure 3). Ease of use, sufficient quantities, and communication were also named as important. The respondents considered other qualities like regular delivery, product stability, and friendliness somewhat necessary. Other than "consistent quality," the respondents marked the attributes inconsistently. This indicates that each food-based business surveyed has slightly different needs as a buyer. As a forest crop grower, you should be prepared to meet their needs through good communication.



Figure 3: What qualities are important to you, as you purchase ingredients from local forest crop producers?

It is always important to find out in what form the buyer would like to receive the product. Your forest-derived item should be as easy to use as the buyer would like. For example, one café might prefer chopped hickory nuts while another wants them as whole as possible. Here, personal service and communication will keep the relationship strong.

Two important markets for forest crop producers are sales to restaurants and to gourmet food processors.

Finally, the survey elicited suggestions about how owners of food service establishments would like to be approached. Brochures were ranked highest, followed by phone and e-mail, then trade shows. Unannounced visits and personal referrals were ranked low. This response underscores the importance of a good product brochure. Forest crop growers should deliver their brochure and follow up with a phone call or e-mail. If the restaurant requests an appointment or sample, follow through immediately. Begin listening carefully to what the chef or food processor would like, then provide what they ask for as consistently as possible.

### **Selling special forest products to retailers**

Sales to retailers are those you probably already have envisioned. You produce a forest-derived product and sell it to retailers, such as craft stores, groceries, or boutiques. They then sell the product to their customers. There are several advantages of this arrangement for producers (adapted from Eubank, 1993):

- Exposure - the forest product grower or producer establishes a public area in which their items are displayed.
- Economy - the producer does not have to bear the high cost of operating a retail store, and maintaining overhead expenses like inventory insurance, advertising, and accounting.
- Focus - The producer can stick to what they are good at without having to spend time and energy handling sales.

Disadvantages include:

- Inventory - The retailer holds the items, reducing the supply or selection the producer could sell themselves.
- Loss of product - There may be a risk of damage or loss that the producer can and cannot control (for example, insufficient refrigeration for fresh mushrooms.)
- Promotion - Advertising is under the control of the retailer, not the producer.

The keys to getting your product “on the shelf” at nearby retailers are your approach, your recognition of the retailer’s needs, and your persistence. In other words, respect for the retailer, and a friendly, thoughtful approach will go a long way. There are some economic considerations as well, such as setting your wholesale price, and suggesting appropriate retail prices. The following

paragraphs explain the different parts that make up a good producer-retailer relationship when it comes to forest products sold through a gift shop, specialty store, or boutique. There is a lot of variety in independent retail outlets, so for the sake of simplicity, this section presumes an established, successful gift shop<sup>4</sup>.

Working with a retailer should be seen as a long-term relationship. Most store owners intend to stay in business for years, or at least be able to sell the store to an interested party at some point. If you have created just a few items and are looking to sell them as a one-time deal, try handling the retailing on your own. Very few small shops are willing to take on a very short-term wholesale-retail relationship.

Summary of points:

- Good retailers get hundreds of requests to sell products each season, but many of them are wild and aimless pitches. You, as a person, have a lot influence over the transaction.
- Marketing forest products is a long-term project, usually taking several weeks of ambitious work every season to keep the product moving.
- Retailers will quickly distinguish who is interested in cooperating with the shop and who is interested in satisfying their own pride. Most retailers want a long-term relationship, even if it is only for a short season every year.
- You have an advantage if your product is new, unique, and does not look mass-produced. Mass-produced looking products will not sell well in small shops.
- The better you meet the retailer’s expectations and needs, the better your product will be featured in their shop.

Five steps in getting your forest product to the shelves of a local retailer are described below:

#### **Step 1 - Explaining your product**

Your forest-derived product should have a rustic, yet useful or particular quality about it. Most people associate forest-derived items with naturalness, practicality, and unusual (yet tasty) flavors or textures. Although you may use plastic packaging to safeguard your product, the product should be as naturally-derived as possible. For example, an evergreen potpourri may seem less authentic if it contains synthetic aroma beads.



Create a simple product card that describes the ingredients and basic steps of preparation. This card may not always travel with your product, but it will be a handy reference for the retailers you work with. Their customers will expect them to know the background story of the products they sell. The more they can explain, the more likely the product will sell. You know the background story better than anyone, so write it down in a brief paragraph. Some retailers might not be terribly interested in the card, but may still keep it on hand, if only for the contact information you have included. Do not expect the retailer to remember what you say out loud about the great qualities of your product. Here's an example of a card to go with a maple nut product:

"This maple-beechnut glaze is made with fresh maple syrup and the tiny nuts from our native American beech tree. Tender nutmeats are scraped from the husk of hundreds of beechnuts and dried. It is blended with the maple syrup at just the right temperature to infuse the mild, nutty flavor with the thickening syrup. The result is a one-of-a-kind glaze for ham, game meat, homemade pastries, or French toast."

If possible, develop a display for your product that tells a little bit about it. The customer will not deduce the special qualities from the label only. Use simple wording and some graphics to catch the eye of the buyer. The customer in the store is ultimately your customer too.

### **Step 2 - Learning about the store and its philosophy**

Small-scale retailers thrive on selling high quality, unique products that appeal to their customers. Therefore, every shop is different and tries to appeal to different people. The only way you will get to know who is ready to sell a forest product like yours is by visiting the shops before you approach them. Look at what products they sell and at what prices.

The philosophy of a store, and the customers it is attempting to reach, is seldom written down where you can see it. You will have to think critically about what you see in the store, the arrangement of the shelves, and lighting. The philosophy is also communicated in the shopkeeper's approach to you as a potential customer.

### **Step 3 - Preparing Your Approach**

Before you attempt to sell your forest product to an area shop you have considered, take some time to prepare your approach. Among other factors, the retailer will respond mostly to the appearance of your product, the label, whether you have a display, the wholesale and retail price, and your level of respect for their time.

#### **Product appearance**

Every boutique, specialty store, winery, gift shop, or health food store will respond to your product sample differently. You may be very fond of what you have produced, but until others experience it for themselves, they will not be as devoted as you. Therefore, you will need to create a compelling package or mini-display that will catch the eye and interest of the retailer. Whether you bring maple syrup, natural jewelry, or birch candleholders, the sample you present should be swathed in appeal. Use natural decorations, like leaves or boughs, to make an attractive background in your sample. Each bottle should gleam with polished cleanliness. Ribbons should be straight and balanced. The product should be easy to remove from your display to inspect, taste, or try on. Make your hard work shine.

#### **Labeling**

Unlike national brands, small-scale retailing tends to be more about the uniqueness of the product and less about the name of the producer. The shop carries the reputation for carrying quality products, rather than the product of a known manufacturer. Your product label should emphasize the particular qualities of your forest product. Tell a story, share an informative fact, or suggest a recipe. When it is done, the label should represent YOU. Unusual artwork or a natural prop, like a twig, makes the appearance of the product special.

#### **Pricing**

You will sell your product to a retailer at a wholesale price, which is substantially lower than the retail price it will carry. The wholesale price you set takes into account your costs of production and distribution, which you should already know, and your profit. On the shelf, the retail price factors in

the retailer's costs of employees, utilities, advertising, bookkeeping, heating and cooling, and dozens of other significant expenses. The difference in the wholesale price you receive and the shop's retail price (the markup) varies tremendously, from 20 percent to more than 100 percent. That means you might sell maple syrup to a winery for \$10 per quart, and then see it on the shelf for \$18-20 per quart.

To see your product on the shelf at twice the amount you received might come as a shock. If you start to think that you are getting a bad deal, remember that you are getting more than just shelf space. You get their advertising, their heating and cooling services, their hours of operation, their location, and their good customer relations.

It is important to know and state the retail price you expect to get for an item, so the owner can judge whether they can sell it at that price. There might be some negotiation involved, but this should be done in a cooperative manner. The shop will see many more customers in their parking lot than you will at your forest or farm.

#### **Respecting the retailer's time**

Good retailers get many appeals to sell products, and have many daily chores and customers to manage. They are busy people. Plan your approach during a slower time in the retailer's workweek. This will vary from store to store, but it is best to avoid the time an hour before or after opening, high volume times like Saturdays, and within a few minutes of closing. During your scoping of a particular store, you should recognize when it is busy and when it is not.

#### **Step 4 – Your Approach to the Retailer**

With an attractively packaged sample of your product, a smile on your face, product cards, and a sense of professional regard, walk into the shop during a quiet time and ask for the owner. Introduce yourself as a local forest product producer. Explain that you have some new and exclusive items that would fit in and sell well in the store. Bring the item with you when you know the proprietor is available. Hand over a product card; suggest

how it might be a good fit (“I see you also carry . . .”); then, open the conversation up for some quick questions. Leave the sample in the store in a “you can keep this” package. This is an effective, respectful, friendly approach. If the owner is not around, ask if you can leave it and follow up with a phone call in a couple days.

#### **Step 5 – Following up**

These retailers are busy people; they are unlikely to call you back. With pleasant persistence (not pushiness), you can quickly decide whether this shop is worth your while. If the owner ignores your calls after several attempts, you should return to collect anything you intended to get back, other than your free sample. Try again in a few months if the timing seemed a little off, which it will be in some cases. Don't leave anything you want to have back; it might get used or eaten by someone.

If the retailer turns down your pitch, avoid the temptation to refute the shortcomings the retailer sees in your product or to insist they have it wrong. There are many reasons why you might have been turned down that the retailer may not want or have time to explain. The shop is their turf and you are the visitor. Ask how the product might be repackaged to meet the store's clientele or just leave your product brochure or business. Check back in 6 months to see if there is any new interest. Make a written note to yourself about the conversation, so you can easily remind the retailer about the contact when you met.

With some planning, research, and a respectful approach, your forest product can start showing up in more places than you would think. You get the advantage of their identity as a quality retail outlet and they get the advantage of your unique craftsmanship.

### **Selling special forest products by consignment**

Selling by consignment involves an agreement to advertise, display, and sell your product at the store, providing you with a percentage of the sale. As the producer, you would still own the product, but the store would sell it for you. In the consignment agreement, the producer retains ownership of the product until it sells through the retailer's store. Though consignment has the same advantages as selling through a retailer, it has some disadvantages (adapted from Eubank, 1993):

- Recordkeeping - Both parties must document all aspects of sales and inventory.

- Cash flow - The producer will not receive payment immediately after each sale  
- usually monthly or at the end of a season.

To make the best of consignment, you should spend several weeks or months investigating potential outlets for your forest product. Look for stores with the atmosphere and customer base you expect will be conducive to your product. Such a store may already sell local items, natural art objects, or unique foods. Consider whether competing items are already on the shelves of the store. As noted above, the better you meet the retailer's expectations and needs, the better your product will be featured in their shop.

Ideally, you should plan on developing a written consignment agreement with the retailer (Appendix 1). It will document a variety of important considerations including:

- Product description - describe the product and how many are provided of each size.
- Terms of consignment - duration of consignment, retrieval and substitutions, and exclusivity of sales.
- Price - expressed as a percent or simply how much is due as a commission, and who pays sales tax (usually the retailer).
- Payment method - monthly, or at season's end, depending on the business; how special orders are handled.
- Damage or loss - agreement on how loss is handled during sales and transportation (such as with a traveling retailer).
- Product liability or warranty - specific language about which party is responsible in the event of contamination or product failure, or simple dissatisfaction with performance.
- Security agreement - covers the producer's goods if the retailer is subject to action by creditors.

Consignment is a common means of selling goods on a small scale. Forest crop producers can take advantage of the thousands of outlets already patronized by potential customers. However, it is essential to keep very accurate records and to communicate regularly with the retailer to ensure sales and products are meeting each other's expectations.

## **Partner with another forest product grower/retailer**

If you have special forest products to sell, see if there is a nearby producer who would be willing to add your item to their inventory. In turn, you can offer their products along with yours should you adopt a direct-to-consumer marketing strategy.

## **Include information at end of every e-mail message**

An e-mail tag is an effective way to increase the visibility of your product. Often called "signatures," your e-mail messages can promote your special forest product easily and inexpensively. Most e-mail recipients do not object to a simple promotion at the bottom of your message. If you use discussion boards, your signature file can be used for forest product promotion, especially if you have a web site where other discussion board users can click to learn more.

Example: Jerry Gettly, maker of real birch frames, candleholders, and rustic home décor. Learn more at [[www.rusticgettly.com](http://www.rusticgettly.com)].

## **Sell through gift shop at nature center or museum**

People who patronize nature centers are often interested in products derived from natural sources. These facilities use gift shops to enhance the visitor's experience, provide souvenirs, and promote education. Your product (maple syrup, natural decorations or flavorings, wildlife foods) can be a welcome addition. Check with the director or gift shop manager to see if there is interest. Bring some samples and brochures. If the museum or nature center is not able to stock your product, they may be willing to at least put out some brochures for visitors.

## **Participate in a shopping center event**

Most malls and plazas host special events to attract shoppers, while meeting community expectations for large-scale educational or entertainment events. One or more of the events are likely to be compatible with your introduction of special forest products, such as Science Day, Farm Day, or Kid's Day. If so, find out more about hosting a display. Most retailers will welcome the presence of a unique, local, naturally-derived product. These events take time and effort, but will help you reach thousands of people in a comfortable, interactive setting. Start by contacting the shopping center administration to get a schedule of planned events. Then, follow up to see if you can set up a display or kiosk for sales at selected events.



## **Sell through a health food or whole food store**

Locally-owned health and whole foods stores attract the kind of customers who are more likely to be interested in a natural product or flavoring derived sustainably from local forests. Often small operations, the proprietors are usually willing to learn more about your product if you set up an appointment or stop by during a slower time of day. Examples of forest-derived products sold at these stores include herbs, maple products, dried berries, specialty mushrooms, nuts, decorative items, flavorings, and sometimes seeds. Even if the store will not be able to carry your product, they may be willing to include your brochure, flyer, or announcement of a special event.

## **Join or create a marketing cooperative**

A marketing cooperative is a group of growers interested in and deliberately working as one entity. Cooperatives offer a more complete package of goods or services to potential customers, bound by a formal agreement to work together. These arrangements are based on the idea of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. An example of a forest product marketing cooperative would be a maple producer, a decorative item producer, and a mushroom producer who have agreed to approach the same stores or operate a common website, offering one-stop-shopping for potential customers. These entities reduce duplicated efforts and spread the work of marketing across several people. Each member of the cooperative agrees to uphold the same standards of quality. The Adirondack North Country Association, for example, has helped arrange the websites AdirondackCraft [adirondackcraft.com] and AdirondackWood [adirondackwood.com] to retail various classes for rustic and natural items from the North Country.

## **Market local products at regional tourist destinations**

When tourists come to your community, where do they go? It may be a State Park, an outdoor theater, a museum, a winery trail, a festival, a skiing or golfing center, or dozens of other destinations. Tourists arrive in a community ready and willing to spend money on souvenirs, unique items, and memorabilia as a way to take home a piece of the country. Make a list of the places tourists are likely to visit, including resorts, motels, and hotels. Each of these destinations represents an opportunity for you to market your forest product. The packaging you provide should be

adequate to meet the need of tourists – durable and informative. Use regional travel books and the “I Love NY” travel guide to find out where tourists are encouraged to visit in your area.

## **Approach chefs and other food professionals for product tasting/introduction**

Some edible forest products like maple syrup and nuts are well known. Others, like flavorings, berries, and mushrooms, need a personal introduction. Busy chefs and restaurant owners will not take the time to find you. You have to make your product visible and easily accessible to them. Start with a brochure sent to the attention of the chef or restaurant owner. After a week, follow up with a phone call, and ask if they would be interested in a sample. If yes, schedule a time to stop by. If no, put their name on an inactive contact list, and try again in 6 months. Professional-grade persistence will probably pay off in a sale or referral if you are seeking a reasonable match between your product and the dining establishment.

Many regions of New York already have networks between restaurants and fresh product growers established. Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty [www.fingerlakesculinarybounty.org] for example, is a network of restaurants and growers developing special cuisine and farm-fresh foods for the Finger Lakes region. In the Capital District, Farm to Chef Express [www.farmtochefexpress.org] arranges transport and handling of farm products headed to participating restaurants in New York City. Adirondack Harvest [www.adirondackharvest.com] provides directions and contacts for restaurants and visitors who want to buy food from local farms. More than 700 producers use the “Pride of New York” label, and are included in an Internet listing of farms [www.prideofny.com].

## **Sell or publicize at a local college**

The hundreds of small and medium-sized colleges in New York represent a good opportunity for agroforestry producers. Many specialty forest products have the offbeat and unique character that college students often seek for dormitory decorations. At student festivals, parent’s weekend events, and possibly through the college bookstores, you can make your product more visible. Any sales or publicity arrangements will require the approval of college administrators. Start by contacting the student activities office, and be ready to explain why your product would be a good, safe, and appealing fit for the campus.

## **Market to home contractors and real estate professionals**

Many real estate professionals, mobile home sellers, and log home contractors provide their clients with a special welcome gift when they finalize new home arrangements. A unique and professional gift, like a wildlife food mix, a quart of local maple syrup, or a decorative item is a good reflection on country living. Make sure that these businesses are well aware of what you have that could serve this purpose. Send these businesses your brochure with a personalized letter in the off-season, introducing your product.

## **Teach a class**

Local continuing education programs, Cornell Cooperative Extension, nature centers, and community colleges host introductory workshops in a wide range of trades and skills related to farming, forestry, crafts, or cooking. With skills and knowledge gained from your agroforestry enterprise, you can gain exposure by sharing your expertise with others. The classes offered by these institutions tend to be informal, with flexible times and dates – a very good fit for forest farming.

To be a good teacher, you must feel comfortable speaking in front of a group and answering questions well, no matter how detailed. Your class will need to be well-organized and top-notch – really worth the effort to participate. Through phone calls and appointments, stay in touch with the program coordinators at each institution. They will decide whether or not you have the qualifications and appropriate class content to meet their needs. Attend other classes offered by the institution to get to know who's who and how they approach the topic. Contact the adult continuing education coordinator or the director of the agency or institution.

## **Supply microbrewery, cider mill, or supply store for beer and wine makers.**

Home brewers and wine makers often use natural ingredients, like maple syrup, oak chips, and spruce needles to derive particular flavors, or to replicate historic styles of beer or wine. Your local brew shop or brew club may already have suppliers of these items, but you won't know for sure until you inquire.

## **Supply other forest product growers/collectors**

As forest crops expand in the Northeast, interest and demand for supplies will increase. There will be continuous opportunities to sell special logs for mushroom production, medicinal herb seed and transplants, natural fertilizers, and other forest crop supplies. Few local sources of these supplies exist.

## **Donate to a charitable auction**

Charitable auctions – for a school, a non-profit organization, or a public television station – are a practical means to introduce and publicize your unusual forest-based products. Gift packs of maple products, a bucket of wildlife food, a willow hutch, or a pound of forest grown mushrooms make intriguing auction items. The charity will make a point to cite your enterprise to the auction audience, each of who could become a steady customer. Keep an eye out for opportunities to donate a portion of your product for the sake of publicity in front of a receptive audience.

## **Small ad in rural living or regional interest magazines**

Since advertising is a matter of being visible to the right people in the right place, focus your advertising expenses toward those who already show an interest in rural and rustic items. Magazines like Adirondack Life, Farming, and the NY Forest Owner have the kind of audience you are trying to reach. Spend your advertising dollars judiciously.

## **References:**

Eubank, Wanda (1993) Home-Based Business – Selling by Consignment, Bulletin MP597. University of Missouri Department of Environmental Design.

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<sup>4</sup>Barbara Hummel, the owner of a popular garden and gift shop in Hector, NY (Skyland Farm) provided many of the insights regarding products and approaches noted here.

Your special forest products are likely to be unique not only in your community, but also on a statewide, national, or international scale.

## Section 2.3

### Distant markets and promotions

Your special forest products are likely to be unique not only in your community, but also on a statewide, national, or international scale. It is unlikely that your operation will expand to corporate proportions, but there are a variety of ways to market your products across large distances easily. Since the development of Internet sales, it is no longer unusual for a small farm in Newark, NY to sell their products to someone in New Orleans, LA or Portland, OR.

There are several ways to develop and maintain distant markets for special forest products, and most will rely on the Internet. However, advertisements newspapers and catalogs can also be used to market to people far from you.

#### Selling special forest products through the Internet

Internet-based commerce of special forest products has several advantages:

- Constant display of images and information about special forest products
- Able to conduct direct retail sales with anyone with an Internet connection
- World wide marketing of unique special forest products

Disadvantages include:

- Potential contacts might be too wide-ranging and too frequent
- Expense of time and money maintaining the website
- Private forest operation may look too accessible to public
- Can be a risky investment of capital better used elsewhere

An Internet web site is plausible way to promote and sell special forest products like maple syrup and mushrooms. A web page is a constant presence in your place, and helps answer questions people are often reluctant to ask. Even without online sales, a web site legitimizes your enterprise in the eyes of many people unfamiliar with specialty forest products. The general public now expects that if you are serious about marketing, you

will have a website explaining your product. Once you have a website, you can leverage your product label, a small ad, an e-mail message, a brochure, or a human interest story in the news.

There are so many ways to establish a website, it is beyond this resource to describe them all. Although many people are able to build a website for you, you will get the best service from a web design professional in your region who is knowledgeable about forestry or farming, or is eager to learn. It is easier for you to explain your forest products to them than it is for you to learn the complexities of effective web page design and hosting. Find web pages of local businesses that appeal to you and contact their web designer, usually noted at the bottom of the home page. Your Cornell Cooperative Extension office may know of professionals who can help forest product producers who do not have much of a marketing budget. You might be able to trade some of your product (maple syrup, gourmet mushrooms) for their service, rather than making it a cash deal.

Once you have a web page, you can expand to the other options for on-line commerce, such as auction sites and on-line catalogs. For example, E-bay [ebay.com] has auction categories appropriate for special forest products, like Bird & Wildlife Accessories (wildlife food), Plants & Seeds (natives), Gas Grill Accessories (flavorwood), and Syrup & Sweeteners (maple syrup).

Virginia Tech [www.sfp.forprod.vt.edu] hosts an online exchange for buyers and sellers of non-timber forest products. As of December 2004, birch twigs, mushrooms, sumac branches, cedar logs, and birch syrup were being marketed by several dozen growers and collectors.

#### Classified or small block ads in urban, suburban, and regional newspapers

Newspaper advertisements can cost from \$5 to \$500, but they efficiently spread the word about your forest-based business. Unlike radio or television, newspaper ads can be clipped and saved to improve the durability of your promotion. New or unique products will be distinct from typical items like furniture and cars. The ad can direct people to a website for more information, or promote one of your key assets - personal service.

#### National distributors and wholesalers

It is beyond the scope of this guide to explain the process of marketing special forest products through national commercial channels. These channels are accessible, but only when the scale of agroforestry operations is significant.



## Section 3.1

### Resources for additional information

These resources are included because of the high-quality, unbiased information they contain or their pertinence to New York special forest products. Many of the websites include helpful bulletins and articles. As you develop your agroforestry enterprise, you will certainly come across other sources of information, so please make an effort to continue your research and education beyond this list.

Agroforestry and marketing considerations Nontimber Forest Products in the United States, edited by Eric T. Jones, Rebecca J. McLain, and James Weigand. University Press of Kansas, 2002. ISBN: 0700611665

Discovering Profits in Unlikely Places: Agroforestry Opportunities for Added Income - BU-07407, by Scott Josiah. University of Minnesota.

Minnesota's Special Forest Products. Marketing opportunities in special forest products including: decorative greenery, dried florals and ornaments, herbs and medicinals, decorative woods, cones, and smokewoods and flavorwoods. Prepared by Mater Engineering for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Cornell University Agroforestry [<http://www.dnr.cornell.edu/cawg>]

USDA National Agroforestry Center [<http://www.unl.edu/nac>]

Association for Temperate Agroforestry [<http://www.aftaweb.org>]

Non-timber Forest Products at the Virginia Tech Department of Wood Science and Forest Products [<http://www.sfp.forprod.vt.edu>]

University of Missouri Center for Agroforestry [<http://agebb.missouri.edu/umca>]

National Learning Center for Private Forest and Range Landowners [<http://forestandrange.org>]  
Click on the tutorial named "The How, When, and Why of Forest Farming"

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service [[www.attra.org](http://www.attra.org)]

Institute for Culture and Ecology's Nontimber Forest Products in the United States [<http://www.ifcae.org/ntfp>]

#### Forest cultivated mushrooms

The Mushroom Cultivator: A Practical Guide to Growing Mushrooms at Home, by Paul Stamets and J.S. Chilton. Agarikon Press, 1984. ISBN: 0961079800  
Shiitake Growers Handbook: The Art and Science

of Mushroom Cultivation, by Paul Przybylowicz and John Donoghue. Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1990. ISBN: 0840349629

Growing Gourmet and Medicinal Mushrooms, 3rd Ed., by Paul Stamets. Ten Speed Press, 2000. ISBN: 1580081754

#### Maple products

North American Maple Syrup Producers Manual (Bulletin 856) 1996. The Ohio State University Extension and the North American Maple Syrup Council. Obtain a print through Cornell Cooperative Extension or view online at [<http://ohioline.osu.edu/b856>]. As of 2004, the Manual was being revised, so availability is limited.

Cornell University Maple Program [<http://maple.dnr.cornell.edu>]

#### Nuts and berries

A guide to nut tree culture in North America / Vol 1. Northern Nut Growers Association, Inc. (2003). ISBN: 0974166308

Northern Nut Growers Association [<http://www.northernnutgrowers.org>] Many articles and references about nut growing.

#### Ginseng and forest botanicals

The Practical Guide to Growing Ginseng by Bob Beyfuss. Cornell Cooperative Extension of Greene County. 906 Mt Ave, Cairo NY 12413 (518) 622-9820

A 65 page primer on growing ginseng in backyards or woodlots.

American Ginseng: Green Gold by W. Scott Persons. Bright Mountain Books, 1994. ISBN 0682402915

Appalachian Ginseng Foundation [<http://www.a-spi.org/AGF>]

Landscaping and habitat restoration / reforestation products

Natural Landscaping: Designing with Native Plant Communities, 2nd ed., by John Diekelmann and Robert Schuster- University of Wisconsin Press, 2002. ISBN: 0299173240

Growing and Propagating Showy Native Woody Plants, by Richard E. Bir. University of North Carolina Press, 1992. ISBN: 0807843660

Specialty wood and decorative products

Non-Timber Forest Products Marketing Systems and Market Players in Southwest Virginia: A Case Study of Craft, Medicinal and Herbal, Specialty Wood, and Edible Forest Products by Sarah M. Greene. (Master's thesis) Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1998.

# Appendix 1

Sample consignment agreement - for educational purposes only

Adapted from Eubank, 1993 - Home-Based Business – Selling by Consignment, Bulletin MP597.

University of Missouri Department of Environmental Design

## CONSIGNMENT OF GOODS FOR SALE BY CONSIGNEE

AGREEMENT made this \_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_\_,

Between \_\_\_\_\_ (artisan's name), hereinafter called the consignor, and  
\_\_\_\_\_, hereinafter called the consignee.

### 1. The Consignor Agrees:

#### Delivery

To deliver to the consignee \_\_\_\_\_ (type of work), hereinafter referred to as "consigned products" for sale at its place of business at \_\_\_\_\_ (name and address of shop or gallery), upon the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth.

### 2. The Consignee Agrees:

#### Acceptance

To receive and accept possession of the consigned products delivered to it by the consignor.

#### Sale

To use its best efforts to sell the consigned products to its customers in the ordinary course of its business.

#### Terms

To sell the consigned products for cash only, except that the consignee may extend credit on its own account paying cash to the consignor for sales so made.

#### Use Own Name

To sell the consigned products in its own name.

#### Price

To sell the consigned products at not less than the consignor's price of (See inventory list) dollars retail, of which \_\_\_\_\_ percent shall be paid to consignor and \_\_\_\_\_ percent shall be retained by consignee.

#### Warranty

To make all sales without warranty of any kind, other than the consignor's standard warranty.

#### Risk of Loss

To assume all risks of loss from damage to or destruction of the consigned products from any cause whatsoever from the time of receiving possession of the same until a sale and delivery to a customer of the consignee or until returned to the consignor at \_\_\_\_\_.

#### Expenses

To pay all expenses incident to the conduct of its business and the sale of the consigned products, including trucking, storing, selling and delivering to customers.

#### Taxes

To pay all taxes and other charges assessed and levied on the consigned products while in the consignee's possession.

#### Records

To keep books and records showing the transaction made under this agreement, such books and records to be opened for inspection by the consignor at reasonable hours.

**Inventory**

On the first day of each calendar month to make and deliver to the consignor a detailed inventory showing all consigned products sold under this agreement.

**Remittances**

On the last business day of each month to make and mail to the consignor a report showing the sales of the consigned products that were made during such month and to remit to the consignor the wholesale price of the consigned products so sold.

**Removal**

To keep the consigned products safely stored at the consignee's place of business and not to remove the same without the consignor's written consent except upon their sale or return as herein provided.

**3. The Parties Agree:****Compensation of Consignee**

The consignee shall retain as compensation the difference between the wholesale invoice price and the price at which consignee sold the consigned products. Compensation to the consignee for sales of consigned products shall be made at the end of each month.

**Title**

The title to the consigned products shall be and remain in the consignor until sold to customers of the consignee, and the title to the wholesale sales proceeds shall vest in and belong to the consignor.

**Assignment**

This agreement shall not be assigned by the consignee without the written consent of the consignor.

**Duration**

This agreement shall continue in force until \_\_\_\_\_. 20\_\_\_\_, at which time the consignee shall, if required by the consignor, return all consigned products remaining unsold to consignor at \_\_\_\_\_ in good condition and free from all freight and charges. The consigned products may be withdrawn by the consignor or returned by the consignee to the consignor at any time. If the consigned products are withdrawn by the consignor, it is the consignor's obligation to pay for any shipping expenses incurred.

**Successors Bond**

This agreement shall be binding upon the assigns and successors in interest of the parties hereto.

**Entire Agreement**

This agreement contains the entire understanding of the parties and may not be changed orally but only by agreement in writing signed by the parties against whom enforcement for any waiver, change, modification, extension or discharge is sought.

**Condition of Default**

(Optional) Failure of the consignee to comply with any reasonable request of the consignor with respect to uniform Commercial Code compliance shall constitute the condition of default under this agreement and shall entitle the consignor to exercise any and all remedies available under the Uniform Commercial Code and this agreement.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have executed this agreement.

Consignor

By: \_\_\_\_\_

Consignee

By: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix 2

### Survey questions for restaurant and small-scale food processors

**Currently, have you or do you purchase any of the following forest-based ingredients for your menu items?**

- ☐ Maple syrup
- ☐ Shiitake and other gourmet mushrooms (canned, dried, or fresh)
- ☐ Flavoring or aromatic wood
- ☐ Herbs like peppermint, bayberry, or sassafras.
- ☐ Unusual berries like elderberry, juneberry, or lignonberry
- ☐ Native, edible nuts like acorns, hickory nuts, beechnuts, or walnuts
- ☐ Wild grapes or grape leaves
- ☐ I have other forest-derived foods and ingredients: \_\_\_\_\_

**Looking forward, which of the following forest products would “fit” on your restaurant or shop menu?**

- ☐ Edible mushrooms cultivated in local woodlands
- ☐ New York maple syrup – light, amber, or dark
- ☐ Grilling wood like apple, maple, hickory, or oak
- ☐ Edible herbs with natural medicinal properties – ginseng, goldenseal, or echinacea
- ☐ Small berries like woodland strawberries or wild blueberries.
- ☐ Flavoring plants like spruce, pine, bayberry, sumac, or sassafras.
- ☐ Nuts like acorns, hickory nuts, beechnuts, or walnuts
- ☐ Wild grapes or grape leaves
- ☐ Other forest-derived foods I would like to offer: \_\_\_\_\_

**If someone wanted to talk to you about supplying forest based ingredients from their forest farm, what kind of approach would best suit you?**

- ☐ Phone call
- ☐ Stop by in the morning
- ☐ Send you a brochure
- ☐ E-mail
- ☐ Referral from a friend
- ☐ Meet at a trade show

Other approach that would suit me: \_\_\_\_\_

**How important is it to get locally-produced ingredients?**

Of no importance      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      Essential  
10

**Would a sample of a forest-grown product be of interest to you if you had not tried it before?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Sample of raw product, like fresh berries
- ☐ Sample of prepared product, like bread made with a nut flour
- ☐ Both
- ☐ No

**What qualities are important to you, as you purchase ingredients from local forest crop producers?**

Consistent quality	Yes	No
Easy to use	Yes	No
Packaged for long self-life	Yes	No
Quantity meets my expectations	Yes	No
Regular delivery	Yes	No
Friendly, easygoing grower	Yes	No
Able to contact grower easily	Yes	No
Other qualities you seek:	_____	

Please add other comments that express your impression or expectations of forest-based food crops:

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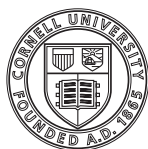
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NOTES



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