

# Festival & Farmers' Markets

*A Guide to Educational Resources  
for Appalachian Agroforestry by the  
Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network*

## BACKGROUND

Landowners integrating farm forestry on their landscapes need options for economic benefits (increased income, better livelihood opportunities). Before landowners will fully embrace agroforestry, identifying opportunities for increasing markets for agroforestry products is important. This is critical to sustaining any nature-based enterprise and important for technical service providers who advise landowners. Participating in festivals is an excellent opportunity. Providing markets is a natural first step to encouraging landowners to adopt agroforestry.

Agroforestry is a burgeoning practice for marketable products. Environmental professionals and service providers now realize that an important incentive for agroforestry adoption and expansion is to address economic opportunities along with the biophysical resources. For most landowners, seeking and supplying often distant markets is complicated and not feasible. Service providers helping landowners establish or increase markets should consider festivals.

Festivals are community or farm-based events that offer important local market opportunities for landowners as they need not travel to markets, but customers come to their location. Festivals are seasonal and held on one or a few days, so the investment of time can be reasonable. Festivals offer visibility for your product as there are often scores of festival visitors. Typically festivals are tied to local heritage (cultural traditions), hosted by a single landowner or community. One example is the annual Highland County Maple Festival where local maple syrup producers have sold most, if not all, of their annual syrup production, and many more agroforestry products - besides just maple syrup.

Festivals do not have to be focused solely on maple syrup - the example portrayed here. In the region, other areas have conducted festivals - the Mount Rogers Volunteer Fire Department yearly conducts three festivals - one that features ramps, another that highlights the area's sorghum production, and a third one focuses on the area's maple syrup production heritage. Festivals or agritourism not only bolster local economies, but they engage local stakeholders, celebrate a sense of collective identity, and help the public to recognize agroforestry and its contributions (see Rivers et al. 2014). In fact the role played by volunteers in festival development suggests that conviviality is as high a priority as economic gain. We have included a sample of these festivals below.



The sale of baskets from forest products during the Highland Maple Festival. Photo by Tom Hammett



Tim Duff demonstrating the evaporation of maple sap into syrup for visitors to the Highland Maple Festival in March 2023. Photo by Tom Hammett.

## OTHER MARKET-BASED OPPORTUNITIES

Agritourism offers visitors the opportunity to visit and experience agriculture and other land-based activities, and raises visitor awareness about agroforestry systems. Visitors to Laurel Fork Sapsuckers in the Spring and Summer can see signage focused on other agroforestry activities such as NTFP intercropping planted under their sugar maples (i.e., ramps, black cohosh, ginseng, and goldenseal). State and local fairs offer opportunities for raising awareness about and help develop markets for agroforestry products and services. In the past these fairs had recognized a way of life found in the region, and celebrated the results of the harvest season.



*Patrons of the annual Pine Knob Ramp Supper, Naoma WV. Photo by Lyntha Scott Eiler.*

During the harvest season (April) community members collect ramps to supply fundraising meals. Here patrons enjoy the annual Pine Knob Ramp Supper on Drews Creek, West Virginia. (source: Library of Congress, Photo by Terry Eiler 1995)

To further encourage agritourism visitors, Laurel Fork Sapsuckers has built an event building in their maple sugar bush for hosting festival guests, showcase their products (i.e., products on their land from maple, ramps, elderberry) and educational displays. A guest house is now being constructed to accommodate overnight visitors and increase income to the farm.

Forest farming field days are festive educational day-long or multi-day events. Both the Yew Mountain Center and United Plantsavers have hosted these important educational events – check their websites for more information.

Farmers markets, some of which feature agroforestry products and artwork focused on non-timber forest products – i.e. the farmers market in Franklin, WV, the Athens Ohio Farmers Market, and others. These are outlets for products and opportunities for education and knowledge exchange.



*Visitors at the Highland County Maple Festival sample types of syrup and get details on each. Photo by Tom Hammett.*

Over sixty years ago, maple syrup producers in Highland County, VA sought to raise awareness of and market the maple syrup they were producing. They opened their farms to show the production process - from tree to bottle - and to showcase their products, increasing their income, and educating consumers about real maple syrup and how it is produced. Over the past 60 years the festival has grown to include music, arts and crafts, and food (pancake breakfasts, and dishes that include maple syrup) - all raising funds for local organizations. It is now the largest maple syrup festival in the USA with over 26,000 attendees during the two weekends.

The festival has more recently been led by the Highland County Chamber of Commerce assistance including developing signage, organizing press coverage, and providing support for advertising. Many aspects of the community garner support from participating in the festival: scholarships for graduating seniors, welfare assistance in the community, support for civic clubs (eg. Rotary Club) all benefit from the festival. Thousands of maple donuts are produced by members of local clubs and school groups - many visitors buy dozens to bring home. There are only a few overnight accommodations (few bed and breakfasts, and AIRBnBs), so many are day visitors. Vendors and maple syrup producers are proactive (putting up signage, publishing a map of all the stops). Some visitors travel from as far away as Charlotte, Richmond, and Washington, DC. Four local civic groups offer breakfasts to the tourists - their only major annual fundraiser. Grants from USDA and State of Virginia have helped collect data on the visitors and the economic impact, focus for outreach, and help producers improve efficiencies. Open to



the public with active syrup making for two full weekends in March. The festival includes several venues that feature local crafts and foods providing additional income to the local economy beyond just syrup.

Landowners in Highland County who had opened their farms for the Festival during March realized the value of the Festival and showed interest in selling other farm products or services. The Highland County Chamber of Commerce now organizes several other annual agritourism events focused on other products and attributes of Highland County. For instance, tourists come to Highland County for the Hands and Harvest Festival (every year during October), open house at the Alleghany Farm (August), and Taste of Highland (July) can sample and buy other agroforestry products.

## ORGANIZING ASSISTANCE TO LANDOWNERS

A growing network of nonprofits and farms in Central Appalachia is providing crucial knowledge transfer. Some have felt that extension and academic entities were not effectively reaching landowners in Central Appalachia. For many the first stop is to consult with neighbors to learn what understory botanicals grow best in the area, and what strategies have been tested for encouraging them. Non-profit organizations and peer learning networks have been effective in re-establishing understory botanicals. Several of these organizations gain income from education and other services.

As a starting point, we highlight here eight organizations in Central Appalachia who offer help for those interested in establishing or expanding understory botanicals. There are several other organizations that one could also consult.

## AGROFORESTRY RELATED FESTIVALS AND EVENTS - SOME EXAMPLES

Several Fall harvest festivals include agroforestry - sunflower, wine, grape, frontier life, wood, apple, and several others are common in the region. Visitors add resources to the local economy, learn about other opportunities to visit the area, and importantly buy the seasonal products (i.e., maple syrup) and increase awareness about the production and availability of agroforestry resources. State agencies realize the economic benefit of festivals and other events, and provide resources and information that encourages visitors. For instance West Virginia Department of Tourism provides access to agritourism activities:

<https://wvtourism.com/things-to-do/arts-culture-history/farm-to-table/agritourism/>

## Highland County Maple Festival 2022 Impact Report: Summary



Photo from the Highland County Chamber of Commerce

### Key Findings

- The festival generated **between \$1.36 and \$2.02 million** in spending in Highland County
- About 26,500 visitors attended
- The average visitor spent between \$15 and \$22 at sugar camps

### Visitor Information

- Visitors on average traveled 98 miles to attend the festival
- 85% of visitors were from Virginia
- Visitors from 14 states attended
- Over 70% of visitors were repeat festival attendees
- Returning visitors on average attended the festival 13 times
- Over 90% of visitors said they are planning to attend the festival again

### Other Information

#### Visitor's Favorite Activities

- Favorite activity for 42% of visitors was sampling maple products
- 23% of visitors said their favorite part was visiting arts and crafts vendors
- 21% said their favorite activity was learning about maple syrup

#### Promoting the Festival

- 59% of visitors heard about the festival through word of mouth
- The next most common way people heard about the event was via social media (19% of visitors)

#### Other Impacts

- 73% of visitors were interested in visiting the area during another season
- Visitors were 21% more likely to purchase maple syrup after attending
- 20% of visitors learned what real maple syrup was during the festival

### About the Report

This document includes key findings from the Economic Impact Report for the 2022 Highland County Maple Festival created by Virginia Tech. The report was created with support from the Highland County Chamber of Commerce and Future Generations University. This work is funded through a USDA ACER grant: "Accessing South Atlantic markets for US Maple Syrup: educating consumers and enhancing distribution networks". Information comes from surveys conducted during the event with visitors and vendors. If you have any questions, please contact Daniel Grizzard at [danielg2@vt.edu](mailto:danielg2@vt.edu).



Future Generations  
University

*The economic impacts of the Highland County Maple Festival shed light on the potential for other events based on farm forestry. Source: Grizzard and Hammett 2022.*



*Agroforestry related festivals and other such events offer opportunities for visitors to learn more about agroforestry and purchase farm forestry products. Photo by Tom Hammett.*

*Here are a few examples of festivals based on a variety of farm forestry or agroforestry products:*

### **Black Walnut**

The West Virginia Black Walnut Festival is held every October in Spencer, West Virginia. Raising awareness of black walnuts and their potential, this traditional agriculture fair features a variety of activities including a "Nut Run", parade, food court, and farm products. Visit: <https://www.wvblackwalnutfestival.org/>

### **Chestnut**

To meet market demand chestnuts have had to be imported and as such require need sanitation treatment before sale/use here. In response to this emerging market several farms have been planting chestnuts (for example see Tonoloway Farm scenario). The Chestnut Festival in Rowlesburg, WV features sharing of science related to chestnut, sale of saplings, and exchange of recipes. Visit: <https://wvchestnutfestival.com/>

### **Maple syrup**

Organized by the West Virginia Maple Syrup Producers Association, Maple Days offers producers an opportunity to host visitors so they may learn about real maple syrup production and purchase products. On the third Saturdays in February and March visitors from several states can visit several maple sugar camps. Information and a link to a map of the camps that are open can be found at: <https://wvmspa.org/>

### **Mushrooms**

The Mountain Mushroom Festival is held in Irvine, Kentucky. From the website: Activities include a morel market, cooking demonstrations, educational panels on mushroom foraging, mushroom cook-offs, and mushroom production demonstrations. Visit this website to learn more: <http://ww7.mountainmushroomfestival.org/>

### **Pawpaw**

The pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) is North America's largest edible native tree fruit with a creamy texture and a tropical flavor. Southern Ohio is noted for wild pawpaw patches. Several festivals and events showcase the tasting, growing and preparing of pawpaws. Ohio Pawpaw festival in Albany, Ohio. Visit: <https://ohiopawpawfest.com/>

During October, the JBR Vineyards and Winery in Giles County, Virginia invites visitors to their

site to sample and purchase a variety of Paw Paw products. Visit their website to learn more: <https://jbr-vineyards-winery.business.site/>

West Virginia also hosts a pawpaw festival: <https://arboretum.wvu.edu/wv-pawpaw-festival>

### **Ramps**

Over a dozen West Virginia communities host ramp dinners -events that raise funds for churches, and civic projects. These meals and other events are usually held during the month of April when ramps are harvested. Harvesters also set up roadside ramp stands in March, April, and May, allowing motorists to grab a bag or bundle ramps as they travel through (see Hufford 2006). States recognize the importance of these events and some market them widely. For example visit the West Virginia Ramp Dinners & Festivals website: <https://wvexplorer.com/recreation/agritourism/ramp-dinners-festivals/>

The Mount Rogers Fire Department in Virginia also hosts a yearly weekend-long ramp festival in late spring featuring music, locally produced arts and crafts, and ramp dinners and a ramp eating contest. The funds raised by this festival and two others - the maple usually held in March and the sorghum festival normally held in the fall (see below) - help support equipment purchase and maintenance for the Mt. Rogers community area.

### **Sorghum**

Festivals featuring sorghum are few but important to local communities. The Mount Rogers Fire Department (Virginia) yearly hosts a molasses festival in October. The West Virginia Molasses Festival has been held in Calhoun County annually in late September since 1967. And for over 50 years The Sorghum Festival, in Morgan County, Kentucky has attracted many visitors to engage with local producers, and learn about this traditional activity. Learn more at: <https://www.morgancountysorghumfestival.com/>

–written by Tom Hammett

## RESOURCES

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Grizzard, Daniel and A.L. Hammett. 2022. Economic Impact Report of the Highland Maple Syrup Festival. Report prepared by Virginia Tech.

Hammett, A. L. 1998. Improving markets for farm forestry products. Fact Net FACT Sheet 98-02 Morrilton, Arkansas. Winrock International. 2 p.

Heppy Organization lists several festivals that occur throughout the region.  
<https://heppy.org/paw-paw-festival/> and has information on pawpaw and 400 other edible plants found in the region.

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