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The Sweet Life: Sugar Alternatives for Your Homesteading Needs

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^[1]If you have a sweet tooth, like me, you may also quake in fear of the day when you can no longer purchase sugar at the store. What's a dessert lover to do if the day ever comes when your sugar canister has run dry?

Never fear – there are many alternatives to white sugar that you can produce on your own homestead. Learning how to cultivate these alternative sweeteners can provide you with not only a product that sates your own family's cravings, but a highly valued barter item.

Honey: Beekeeping is a hobby you can start now. Even a small urban lot can provide the nominal amount of space required for a hive (Check your local regulations first – this is not legal in every municipality.). Get advice from other local beekeepers and do some research first. You want to be sure your area has enough flowers to keep your bees in pollen! Beekeeping is not terribly expensive. You will need:

- Bees and a hive (can be ordered by mail)
- A smoker
- Protective clothing
- Extraction equipment

Honey has many nutritional and medicinal benefits as well. It has wound healing properties, is antibacterial and is an excellent cough remedy.

Stevia: Stevia is a natural, low-calorie sweetener that has a slight "black licorice" flavor.

This plant is native to South America. The shrub likes well drained, sandy soil and a warmer climate, but you can also cultivate stevia plants indoors. Harvest all of the leaves from the plant and dry them in full sun for about 12 hours or place the plants on a piece of newspaper in an area with good air circulation. Once the leaves are thoroughly dried, they can then be ground into a powder using a mortar and pestle or coffee grinder. A home dehydrator can also be used, although sun drying is the preferred method. This produces a flavor far sweeter than sugar (30 times sweeter, in fact), so adjust your recipes to use smaller amounts. A good rule of thumb is to use 1 heaping tablespoon for every one cup of sugar in terms of the level of sweetness.

You can also make your own stevia simple syrup by adding a cup of warm water to 1/4 cup of fresh, finely-crushed stevia leaves. This mixture should set for 24 hours and then be refrigerated. It works perfectly for sweetening beverages.

Maple Syrup: If you happen to live in an area where you are blessed with maple trees, you have a delicious natural sweetener just waiting for you to harvest and process it.

There is only one ingredient in maple syrup, and that is the sap from a maple tree. As temperatures begin to warm up in the spring, the sap begins running. A small hole, just an inch and a half deep, is drilled in the tree and a fitting called a "spile" is inserted and tapped into the hole. From the spile, the sap is directed into a collection bucket. Once the sap is collected it must be processed immediately to prevent spoilage.

It takes a lot of sap to make maple syrup. The ratio is about 10 gallons of sap to make 1 quart of syrup.

To process your maple sap, you must boil it to evaporate the water that it contains. This can take many hours. Because of all the steam that is produced, most people boil the sap outdoors. Then the syrup must be carefully filtered, using a coffee filter.

The website Tap My Trees goes into minute detail with instructions for making your own maple syrup at home, without a lot of fancy equipment. Click [here](#) ^[2] for more information.

Sorghum: A long-time cash crop in the South, most sorghum produced now is turned into feed for livestock.

Sorghum is a very useful crop that can be used for much more than making syrup. Sorghum seeds can be removed from the head and treated much like wheat, ground and used as a grain (If you are on a gluten-free diet, sorghum is safe for you.).

125 feet of sorghum produces about 10 gallons of syrup. The cane of the sorghum contains approximately 10% sugar. Sorghum is one of those crops that grows very easily, without much need for watering, fertilizing or nurturing.

Sorghum syrup is labor intensive but doesn't require much in the way of supplies or equipment. You need a large kettle, a heat source and a press of some description.

After the cane is harvested, the leaves are stripped and the cane is pressed to extract the sweet green juice. This needs to be done as soon as possible after the cane is cut, before the juice turns to a starch that is difficult to extract. The juice is put into large pots and brought to a boil. A foam will build up at the top that needs to be constantly skimmed off and discarded. Once the boiling liquid stops producing foam, it is ready. This may take several hours.

The ratio is 7 gallons of cane juice to produce one gallon of sorghum syrup. More information on the production of sorghum can be found [here](#) ^[3].

Sugar Beets: Sugar beets are as easy to grow as regular beets and have the added bonus of providing you with a delicious and healthy sweetener. They do best in moist, well-drained soil but are fairly adaptable as long as the watering needs are met. Sugar beets provide up to 18% sugar.

Beets are a root plant, so they are harvested by pulling them from the ground. The green tops are excellent for both human and livestock consumption.

To make your sugar, the beet itself needs to be well-scrubbed to remove the dirt. Grate the beets or slice them thinly and then place in a large stockpot to simmer. (Note: be warned, your home will smell very strongly of cooked beets after this process – you might want to ventilate your kitchen!)

1. Mash the cooked beets with a potato masher to release the sweet juices and then return the pot to the stove.
2. Simmer a bit longer, and then remove from heat.
3. At this point, you will drain the mashed beets and squeeze out as much liquid as possible, using cheesecloth or coffee filters.
4. Filter this liquid back into the pot through more cheesecloth and proceed to cook this liquid down, leaving the lid off to allow for evaporation.

5. Cook the liquid down to a brown syrup, until it reduces to about 1/3 the original amount. Strain it to catch the sugar crystals that have formed and put them aside to dry.
6. Return the liquid to the pot and cook it down further until it has completely crystallized.

Sugar beets have the added bonus of being a better source of the alternative fuel ethanol, than even corn. They use less land, less water and the hardier crop can be grown in many regions even during the winter when it's too cold to grow corn.

Take a look at your current resources. Consider your climate, the land you have available and research which of these sweeteners you could produce most efficiently! Your future desserts may depend on it!

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[2] here: <http://tapmytrees.com/>

[3] here: <http://doctorschar.com/features/sweet-sorghum-sorghum-bicolor/>

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