



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection
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TWIN LAMBS SURPRISE FARMER JEFF

Volunteers at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road took advantage of a January lull in outside work and gave the Education building an early spring clean. Once again the storage area and kitchen cupboards were ruthlessly cleared out and re-arranged. Storage containers were purchased, and filled with less used items like 200 pasta bowls! These were labeled, and carried to the new storage room in the machine shed. Being Stratford, there was very little actually thrown away. Anything that could be recycled, sent to Goodwill, used by anyone, or even sold on-line went into its own pile. Now, how long before this order is turned upside down?

The clean-up was timely, as the annual Volunteer Appreciation Dinner took place the last Saturday in January. The staff prepared, served, and cleaned up, as a thank you to the 214 people who volunteered in 2015. Most years the weather is biting but this year it was pleasantly warm. Upwards of a hundred people enjoyed plenty of time to chat, and partake of antipasto, Stratford's own meat and vegetarian lasagna, luscious fruit crumble, and lemon bars. A total of fourteen thousand hours were logged, the equivalent of seven full-time employees. Everyone was recognized, and thanked for the time they donated to enable Stratford to be a vibrant environmental education center.

Farmer Jeff walked into the barn on Thursday morning, February 4, and discovered twin lambs had been born during the night. It seems that not only did our Tunis ram break out in early October when he remained with the ewes, but he had an earlier short episode and the twins were the result! The mother was ewe number eighteen, the last of our Tunis/Dorset crosses, who is eight years old. A pensioner by some farmers' standards, but it is normal for us to keep a healthy animal that is still breeding.

The ewes and nanny goats had been separated in preparation for the upcoming lambing season. Despite this, the first-born lamb managed to crawl under the fence, while his mother was giving birth to the second lamb, and a goat set about cleaning him! It is cute to envisage, but bodes no good for the lamb. When he returned to the ewe she rejected him, as he no longer smelt like her own lamb. Fortunately, as she is a calm ewe, Farmer Jeff was able to hold her during the lamb's early feedings, and finally she accepted him.

After helping the Tuesday gardening crew weed the greenhouse on February 2nd I walked along the edge of the fields next to the sugar bush, to see what the farm hands were up to at the Sugar Shack. On my way I noticed a sweeping band of white amongst the trees and realized with amazement that the crew had attached spiles and hung buckets on 200 sugar maple trees. Sugaring season had started! The following Friday sixty gallons of sap was gathered, and on the next Tuesday two hundred and twenty gallons! The sap was stored inside the sugar shack, to avoid freezing solid in the outside tank before cooking started mid-month.

February 16th dawned with temperatures around thirty, and a light layer of snow covering central Ohio. School was cancelled or put on a two-hour delay, and our first school group of the season was a no-show. However, cooking commenced, and there was no lack of activity around the Sugar Shack.

Some of the Tuesday crew had invited the Tuesday volunteers and staff to their annual breakfast of buckwheat and almond milk pancakes, sausage, bacon, coffee, and juice at the Sugar Shack. It was a first for me, and I was impressed with the arrangements. Simple but effective, with a cooking rack over the campfire. The food was delicious, and the setting a picture. Thank you guys and pancake gal!

Dave Nobel, Stratford's apiarist, shared that the bees have received some supplementary feeding in the past month. Normally the bees sleep, but during the unusually warm winter days they were tempted to leave their hives, believing they would find nectar. They were disappointed, and returned having expended a lot of energy for nothing. They recouped by eating their honey reserves, depleting supplies to the point they will not last until spring without help.

Beekeeper Dave was able to take excess honey combs from certain hives, and place them in depleted hives. He and an Ohio Wesleyan student also made 13 inch by 9 inch sugar candy slabs, consisting of boiled water, sugar and lemon juice, and laid them in the hives. The results of these efforts are looking encouraging.

Along with the school maple sugar tours, the fifth grade Messages from the Earth program has begun its day-long winter sessions. Small Farmers who signed up for the first of four visits this year will arrive on February 23 to experience winter on the farm. The Stratford Book Talks continue on the fourth Friday of the month, with Bird Behavior scheduled for February 26. A list of this year's topics can be picked up at the front desk. We encourage you to sign up for the February 27 public tours to the Sugar Shack, and remind you that the annual Maple Sugar Breakfast is March 5. The 2016 calendar is now on our web site, and on-line registration is possible for many of our activities.

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