



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection
by Pauline Scott
Farm & Nature Guide & Board of Trustees

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STRATFORD ECOLOGICAL CENTER PREPARES FOR LAMBING

The long holidays are behind us, and the Tuesday farmhands at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road could hardly wait to get back into routine on January 10, despite the slick roads and bold signs on the entrance lane proclaiming ICE, slow down! Farmer Jeff had plenty to keep them busy, including mixing bulk hog and chicken feed, and cleaning out pens in the barn.

Frozen ground has its advantages, as it allowed a tractor pulling a trailer full of manure to maneuver across the fields to the South Pasture, where it dumped the rich organic matter onto the existing manure pile to break down over the coming year. With lambing expected to start in early February it was necessary to clean out the small pens, which will be used to house the new mothers and their lambs, as well as to clean up the large pen for the ewes now the fattening hogs have left the farm.

We did indeed keep the hogs until the arranged processing date. Farmer Jeff drove them there on the evening of January 8. The seven were big, and during the drive they added extra momentum to the Suburban, and caused the trailer to sway, until they settled down! Their total weight was 1,934 lbs., an average of 276 lbs., and well over the preferred 250 lbs. This extra fat means we will have more lard to sell than usual. There is a demand as it makes some of the best pastry.

Regular cuts of nitrate-free bacon were taken from all the hogs. Three of the hogs provided whole hams, ribs, and sage-seasoned sausages. The other four provided loin roasts, pork chops, bratwurst, shoulder roasts, and sausages. This organic meat is available for sale.

The eighth hog, a gilt, stayed on the farm. The Tuesday crew were enlisted to pick out the best one for breeding. They assigned the responsibility to Dan, whom they believed would make the right choice, after being raised on a farm many, many decades ago. His choice is long and well-proportioned, and will be bred along with her mother, Bella. Some have suggested the gilt be called Donna. That's all well and good when the mind immediately thinks of bella donna, Italian for beautiful woman, but belladonna, a plant renowned for its poison properties, is not quite my image of Stratford!

The girls are presently in the same pen as our newly purchased pure Tamworth boar. Owning our own boar means he can stay indefinitely. It allows Farmer Jeff to separate and rest them, and then reintroduce to fit their breeding cycle. The boar is a little smaller than Bella, and about the size of the gilt. They appear to be getting along, and certainly have a lot to say to each other which can be quite deafening.

The twenty-five hens are down to laying two eggs a day between them. A beautiful cooper's hawk has feasted on the few bantams that were part of the flock. In one instance, he was brazen enough to eat his kill in the hen run. The male bantam remains and perhaps that's because he is bigger and more aggressive. As usual we will bring in day-old chicks in the spring to build up our numbers.

The coydog has been seen again cutting across the pasture in field 5. He looks so like a wolf and is becoming more and more bold. His huge footprints were seen in the snow between the woods and the south side barn yard gate. It is worrisome with stock around.

Meanwhile, a raccoon or possum attacked our barn cats Tiger and Chiki. Tiger went to Veterinarian Dr. David Pitkin in Delaware to recuperate. Chiki has a pronounced bend towards the end of his tail but it is not broken, and he seems unconcerned and as affectionate as ever. Dr. Pitkin comes out regularly to dehorn and castrate our cattle. He is the last large animal veterinarian in the area, except for OSU in Columbus and Marysville, and we highly value his services.

It is sad to share that the matriarch of our goat family, Liberty, died suddenly in early January at the age of 13. She asphyxiated on her cud. Liberty produced some gentle offspring that allowed the school children to milk them without fussing, but in later years produced males so very few of her line remain on the farm. Our goat numbers overall are somewhat down, and we may phase in a new breed of goat that would do well in our Ohio climate and with our young farmers.

Maple sugaring will start again in mid-February. We hope you will join our Saturday tours to the Sugar Shack, and mark your calendars for the annual pancake/sausage breakfast the first Saturday in March.

Pauline Scott is a farm and nature guide at Stratford Ecological Center, 3083 Liberty Road, Delaware. She can be reached at 740-363-2548 or by email at info@stratfordecologicalcenter.org.