



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection
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MAPLE SAP FLOWING BETTER THAN EXPECTED AT STRATFORD ECOLOGICAL CENTER

As I stood recently, at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road, looking over the Corral fence and across the South Pasture towards the Sugar Shack, I spied metal buckets hanging on the sugar maple trees. It seems impossible we have gone through another farming year, and it is maple sugaring time again. With the warm winter, Farmer Jeff feared there may not be a maple sugaring season, and the only thing he could do was to “go with the flow!” Fortunately, when the Tuesday crew tapped 235 trees on February 7 the sap flowed immediately. Temperatures dropped later in the week, and the sap froze in the buckets preventing collection.

After a thaw on February 13, the sugar crew emptied the overflowing buckets into a tank, fitted onto the four-wheel gator, for transportation to the Sugar Shack. They collected 357 gallons, a record in one day. They were satisfied, but very tired after covering a lot of terrain, including climbing the steep banks beside the stream. On Tuesday, the fire was lit under the evaporator and the initial cooking began. This usually takes 24 hours. The subsequent batches take 8 hours of hard cooking. Depending on the amount of water in the sap it takes 50 gallons of sap to produce a gallon of syrup.

Two of last year’s environmental education interns, Michael and Paula, returned in early February and began leading school groups out to the sugar shack this past week. It is unusual for interns to return, as Stratford is usually regarded as an invaluable interlude in their life experiences. It is, however, a great help to have seasoned interns, and we were glad we did not have to say farewell to them.

Along with rookie intern Sierra, they are responsible for taking the llamas, Rafiki and Lighting, for a daily walk and introducing them to groups of people who love to pet them. Initially they are led on a halter, with nothing on their backs. Later a back pack is introduced, as they are bred to be pack animals. There is a story about a llama who would help at sugaring time, by carrying buckets on either side of his body. But when something scared him, he went careening off with the buckets flapping and the sap flying! This necessitated a return to manual labor!

Fifty-five people from the Delaware community turned out on a snowy, dark evening on February 8 to listen to Dr. Jarrod Burks, Director of Archaeological Geophysics at the Ohio Valley Archaeology Inc., share results from a survey of the Stratford Cemetery carried out on August 30 last year. Dr. Burks reviewed the four technologies used, discussed his findings, and offered guidelines to help in future restoration, and answered lots of questions. The next steps are to probe very carefully and dig up buried stones; restore and reset the stones; mark the four corners of the original cemetery; and eventually erect a fence to define the boundaries. We are looking for someone to write the story of Stratford and the Cemetery. Any takers?

Farmer Jeff sent the twin goats to the processors this month. The twins were born prematurely last spring with underdeveloped legs. They have done remarkably well, but it is now time to let them go as they are not strong enough for breeding. Their timid mother has had a hard time getting enough to eat beside the rest of the goats. She is small, and will leave us after she gives birth this spring. We also parted with Gunther, our buck, as we start down the path to selecting a different breed of goat.

The animals are all now restricted to the barn, except the cattle who have access to the barn yard. But I noticed a few cow pats on the grass outside the barn yard fence, which is a sign that a bovine has been grazing where it is not usually allowed. It is not their fault if they think a gate left open is an invitation to find a treat! Sometimes we have problems with visitors forgetting to shut a gate. A farm golden rule is that if you find a gate closed, to please shut it behind you. This saves Farmer Jeff a lot of stumbling around in the dark rounding up animals, and ensures the vegetables in the Children's Garden don't end up in a cow pie!

Hopefully, the sap will continue to flow well into March, and we invite you to join the tours to the Sugar Shack on Saturday, February 25, as well as to the annual Farm Pancake Breakfast and tours on Saturday, March 4. A pre-season Beekeeping Overview starts on Saturday, March 11. A night hike to monitor the Vernal Pool is scheduled for Fridays, March 17 and April 7. The 2nd Tuesday of the month "Story Time on the Farm" begins on March 14. Please visit our web site for details.

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