



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection
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EARLY SIGNS OF SPRING EVIDENT AT STRATFORD ECOLOGICAL CENTER

After a night of heavy rain, March 1 came in like a lamb as well as a lion, with temperatures in the 60's, outbreaks of sunshine, strong winds and a drop to more normal temperatures by the next day. The drop was fortunate for Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road and their maple sugar operation, as it meant conditions were right for the sap to continue to flow. The annual Pancake Breakfast, and tour to the Sugar Shack, was scheduled for March 4, and it is much better to be cooking sap, rather than water, to demonstrate the evaporation process used in making maple syrup.

The sugaring operation officially closed for the season on March 7, when the temperatures rose yet again and were predicted to stay high. This causes the sap to turn green and bitter. Cooking continued for the next few days, and brought this year's output to thirteen gallons. This is only half the yield compared to those years when sugaring continued until April Fool's Day. Volunteers bottled the syrup, and it is available for purchase while supplies last, which is never very long!

Usually, the male spring peepers or chorus frogs in the Button Bush Swamp begin letting the females know they are looking for a mate around the time maple sugar season ends. This year they could be heard during the warm days in February.

Since late February the salamanders have emerged slowly whenever it is warm and wet. Fifty-two were caught in one research trap in the vernal pool. This year there is less likelihood of a mass March migration across the lane to the pool, an event which often jeopardized their longevity!

Spring, in the form of lambs and goat kids, came early to Stratford, when twin lambs were born on February 9 and triplet kids, all girls, on February 20. The day the triplets were born was sunny and 63F. It coincided with the Messages program for 5th Graders, and one of our periodic luncheons to introduce new people to Stratford. Many watched the births, and apparently, there were some very interesting reactions.

Since then the number of lambs has risen to over fifteen and nine kids. The chicks have started to hatch in the classroom incubator. Sassy, our Jersey cow, gave birth to a heifer calf. Sassy is the granddaughter of Sugar, who at age twelve continues to be our Matriarch. Sweet Annie, our Red Devon, also calved and produced a heifer. Annie is a daughter of Bessie, whom we think is finally in-calf. Bessie is always rotund, and she has fooled us several times into thinking she is about to calve.

All the animals are becoming antsy after being cooped up in the barn. There is enough grazing in fields 6 & 7 near the Sugar Shack for the cattle, however Farmer Jeff is only allowing them out as far as the corral. Should a calf be born further afield it would be unable to walk through the mud to get to the barn with its mother.

With the Barn Yard already littered with hoof marks it is a good time to broadcast some grass seed to rejuvenate the area, and let the cattle stamp the seed into the ground as they roam. The seed will stay buried until there is a plentiful supply of moisture and warmth in the spring when it will germinate.

There have been too many grey days, and too much condensation in the big greenhouse this winter, resulting in mold growing on the vegetable plants. Some plants like Pak choi have succumbed, and had to be removed, but others have revived after heavy pruning. Presently there are sufficient greens to make it well worthwhile to come pick them. Especially when you stop by the barn and see those healthy fat lambs, kids and calves who never fail to astound with their beauty and raise your spirits.

You would never be taken for a fool on Saturday, April 1, if you attended our gardening classes, seed swop and self-care/fitness instruction planned for that day. You can find more details on our website. The first of seven different fiber classes start with Crochet 101 on Saturday, April 8 from 10–12 noon, fee \$15, ages 12 and up. The Herb Group will host their annual Edible Wild Plant ID Walk and Lunch on Tuesday, April 25 from 11-1 pm, fee \$20, with a photo handout, and recipes to take home. Reservations are requested for all our classes. We hope you can participate.

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