



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection

by
Pauline Scott

Farm & Nature Guide & Board of Trustees

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IS IT ANOTHER PHANTOM PREGNANCY FOR ROSIE?

It was a messy business in early January, when work commenced to drill a new well on the front lawn at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road. The addition of a second well on the property will ensure a continuous water supply to meet Stratford's needs, as animal and visitor numbers increase.

Perhaps it was not too surprising, given the number of underground limestone caverns in the area, to unfortunately discover one of our own, creating a problem for the well installation. Our best recourse was to relocate across the driveway, near the gazebo, and drill again. To our dismay we met with the same result. After flooding the area to no avail, with foam, to envelop the drilling cuttings and carry them up to the well head, a decision was made to install a 100 foot steel casing and continue drilling until we reach water. Let's keep our fingers crossed the old well holds up, as it will be some time before we can complete the work and depend on the new water supply.

The trails in the woods are not so muddy to make walking unpleasant, and it was fun to get some fresh air and make our way one morning to the Hush and Cemetery Trails on the eastern edge of the property. Last fall, a group of volunteers cleared out the fallen debris and long grass in the small cemetery, dating from the 1830's and likely earlier, making it a lot easier to reach the stones, some with remarkably legible inscriptions.

This area of the farm contains hidden treasure, better known as geocaches. Searching for geocaches is a twenty-first century form of treasure hunting, using a handheld GPS, to within twenty feet of the site. The cache, housed in a water proof container, contains small items placed by participants and a tiny book for signatures. Further information on this world wide pursuit can be found on the internet.

After the excitement of hunting for the caches, it seemed a good idea to experience the calming "String Hike" located on the Hush Trail. String has been stretched between trees in a circle for fifty yards. Simple instructions share the idea of grasping the string with one hand, closing your eyes and walking slowly forward, allowing all your senses to take over. Without the need for haste, you can hear the birds, feel the wind, and smell the air. This form of enjoyment has been around for a long time.

The woods will be alive with people this month as maple sugaring gets underway. Volunteers are welcome to come out and tap some of the 150 trees, and carry the sap to the sugar shack, where a new evaporator will hasten the sap-to-syrup process. Sugaring culminates with Stratford's popular Maple Sugar Festival on Saturday morning, March 13. A breakfast will be served, including our farm-raised sausage and home-made pancakes, covered with fresh maple syrup. Horse and tractor-drawn wagon rides to the sugar shack will be available weather permitting.

Rosie, our eighteen month old pig, and her mother, Roja have enjoyed the company of the Tamworth/Berkshire boar on loan to us. Within a week of his arrival in early January mating had begun. Whether jealous or anxious for her daughter, Roja was observed pushing the boar off Rosie. We THINK Rosie is in pig as she has gained 75 lbs. We cannot be certain. Rosie put on weight in exactly the same way last year, after we had seen her mating, only to have a false or phantom pregnancy. We hope this is not the case, as the piglets play their part in educating our young visitors that the source of their food begins on the farm not in the grocery store. The boar is much smaller than Roja, and we are not sure if their mating has been successful. The boar will stay until early March.

The new calf, Annie, brought in with her mother, Sweet Bessie Lou, late last year, is a cross between a Red Devon and a Hereford. She has inherited the Hereford's white markings, with a shaggy star on her forehead and white socks, and sprouts small horns. Annie was born last spring and looks to me like a small bison. Maybe I need stronger glasses! When she first arrived I shared she was a he, for which I apologize. It was due to the fact the breed is raised for meat, and I kept thinking she was a boy being raised for us to eat. In fact, we are breeding Annie this spring and she will have either a steer to fatten, or a heifer calf to keep for breeding, by year end.

Classes at Stratford start next month, with details and registration on our web site. They include Urban & Container Gardening, March 6, 10-12; Raising Chickens, March 20, 10-12; Organic Gardening, March 27, 10-12, Vegetable Seeding, March 27, 1-3. However, with the maple sugaring activities and animal antics, there is no need to wait a month before coming out to spend time with us.

Pauline Scott is a farm and nature guide at Stratford Ecological Center, 3083 Liberty Road, Delaware, Ohio 43015. Tel. 740-363-2548. Email stratfordcenter@aol.com Web site www.stratfordecologicalcenter.org

"Farm Connection" is a monthly article connecting city folk to life on the Stratford Ecological Center farm. It is published on the first Saturday of the month on the farm and garden page of *The Delaware Gazette*.

Stratford Ecological Center
3083 Liberty Road • Delaware • Ohio • 43015
740-363-2548 • stratfordcenter@aol.com • www.stratfordecologicalcenter.org