



Farm Connection
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TRAIL BLAZERS CHEER BROWNIE QUEEN

July's weather may have been hot and humid at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road but it hardly fazed those involved with a myriad of activities on the farm and in the woodlands.

Thanks to the moisture, the scrawny tomato plants set out in late June became green bushy plants in seemingly no time. Most are nicely staked or caged and mulched with thick slices of old hay. Farmer Jeff Dickinson left plenty of space between the rows to chop up the weeds with a cultivator. Hand weeding is necessary beside the plants but proved easy using a garden fork followed by a willing puller.

It's a relief to know our two Agricultural Interns and a handful of volunteers can handle so many tomatoes, as well as the flourishing peppers. Last year the weeds got ahead and made picking difficult. We grow for sale or u-pick, and for People in Need in Delaware. Kevin Crowley, PIN Director, shared that many community gardens and area churches are growing extra to share with grateful recipients. Stratford welcomes those interested in learning how to grow their own vegetables by providing hands-on experience.

Stratford's reason for being is to provide a place of education, where children and adults connect with nature. At the same time, Stratford provides a peaceful environment in which to restore the mind and body. Who would think that weeding together in the cool early morning could offer the perfect time to re-connect with a friend?

The new water well is now operable and certainly worth the trouble and expense to install. We needed to switch over after the original pump failed mid-month. We rely on our wells to water the animals, the gardens, and to supply the education building.

The spelt crop sat in the fields awaiting combining. We were willing but the 1975 New Holland combine with its Ford 240 industrial engine was not so eager. It was overheating and needed a new water pump and a belt. It took a couple of weeks to locate the right belt for such an old combine. When we finally combined, the last Friday in July, it was necessary to stop every forty minutes to cool the engine. The pump will be overhauled this fall.

The hay baler did a good job baling the nutritious oat crop and alfalfa in field 4. We could have combined the full heads of graceful oats but we had no where to store the seed. We continued using the baler in field 1 on a second cut of clover hay. However, when we came to the spelt straw it quit working. The recent rains have caused the straw to turn brown making it unfit for baling, so it will be turned under to improve the soil.

The four-inch deluge of early July rains was too much for our freshly planted corn crop. We rushed to plant the seed between the June rains, in rougher ground than normal, and 60% of the crop washed out during the downpour. The loss means we will have to buy corn this fall. We intend to plant the field with sorghum grass to graze or make hay. This year's weather pattern has made it one of the most difficult farming years.

A new 5-day program for 5th graders called Sunship Earth starts at Stratford in October. Twenty seven activities within the Sunship Earth Study Station provides hands-on opportunities to help the students understand how their world functions – and to like what they understand. This program addresses 80% of their 5th grade science requirements.

Preparations for Sunship Earth include blazing new trails through the woods by removing honeysuckle and grapevines. Trail blazing is hard work, but judging by the smiles of those returning for lunch, packed into the back of our red truck, it's well worth it. What made it even more so were the delicious brownies provided by our infamous Brownie Queen. The Trail Blazers cheered as she walked into the kitchen. The Queen provides brownies at just the right moment, be it a hot hay-making day or a cool cattail-pulling.

Seven young goats went off to auction, as we were overcrowded, causing health problems. Two flatbed trailers provide shade for the remaining goats and sheep in the north pasture. Five nanny goats continue to be milked daily. Most children, who begin by watching, end up excitedly trying to milk. The trust formed between the adult, goat and child is awesome. We are giving our pigs, Roja and Rosie, a chance to stay around and farrow by Labor Day. Sugar is in-calf and despite the fact she has a very round body is not due until January.

Volunteer opportunities exist for Sunship Earth this month. On August 9 from 10 – 12 am. we need help with a paint project, and on August 12 from 9 – 12 am. we have another trail blazing opportunity. Dress for paint or dirt! Movie Night on the Farm is scheduled at 9 pm. on August 14. Please call to let us know if you would like to come.

"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*.

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