



Farm Connection

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DISCOVER THE SOURCE OF A SPRING TONIC

The month of March may have come in like a lamb at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road but it went out like a lion, with over three inches of snow last Wednesday. Daytime temperatures were in the thirties, fifteen degrees below normal. The temperature and rainfall during the month fluctuated, affecting farm and woodland life.

Hundreds of salamanders abruptly left their winter earth homes, located within three miles of our swamp, to return to their place of birth to mate. The “run” occurred during the cool night of Wednesday, March 16, according to Sally Waterhouse, a retired professor at Ohio Wesleyan, who for the past twenty years has helped monitor this vernal pool, often with students in tow.

Once there is a sufficient level of moisture to meet the salamander’s skin requirements and the days become warmer, they set off. This year was an unusually early run. It often occurs the third or fourth week of March or even early April. The salamanders mate in the water and the females lay their eggs in clumps on underwater vegetation. In a month or so, they hatch as larvae with gills. In another two months they lose their gills and become young salamanders. They leave the water and hide under rotten logs, which visiting children delight in turning over in order to find and hold them.

At the same time as the run, chorus frogs and peepers could clearly be heard along the entrance lane, bordering the swamp. There is a saying: “Hear chorus frogs and peepers and sugaring season is over.” Stratford can attest, at least this year, that it is true. As soon as warmer weather and the frogs put in an appearance, the sap containing sugar stopped flowing, and left the new leaves to make their own food. We produced twenty gallons of maple syrup. It was our shortest season in fifteen years and reflected a similar experience in Vermont for the last couple of years. Should these weather patterns continue, the result could be a much smaller supply of maple syrup nationwide.

The heavy rainfall early in the month and subsequent water runoff, filled our pond. Water levels had remained low during the winter after extensive work last summer to remove the cat-tails, deepen the edges of the pond, and raise the height of the dam at the east end. With little rain since the middle of the month, the murky pond water had a chance to “settle,” and the soil particles dropped to the bottom.

Now the pond is in the process of its annual “turn.” During the winter a layer of warmer water sits under the colder top layer, and in the spring this arrangement is reversed. The turn re-distributes food by releasing pond vegetation, which thrives in the sun-light. Fish, having spent their winter in the lower, warmer layer follow its return to the top. The fish, the frogs, having spent their winter buried in the muddy edge, and other pond inhabitants will start the cycle of life all over again.

It is a relief to share our two barley fields have turned green and look healthy, after appearing somewhat dubious following the snow melt. The cattle are eying the growing grass in the adjacent field with longing. Farmer Jeff Dickinson said it is necessary to wait another two or three weeks before turning them out, to give the grass time to become more strongly rooted and thicker. Waiting ensures the grass will rejuvenate quickly, after the cattle have grazed the field and moved onto the next one.

Last summer, weather delayed a final cutting of orchard and alfalfa grass for hay. It looked like the worst hay we had ever baled, and it did not help matters when the excessive heat in the hay loft turned it brown. The grass was grown on healthy soils which produce a lot of nitrogen, which in turn becomes protein and is absorbed by the livestock. To be sure the protein content did not match the hay’s appearance; we tested in the fall and found the level to be high and very acceptable in winter feed.

Recently, we exhausted our hay supply and purchased some lush green clover and alfalfa hay to carry us over. Despite its appearance, when tested, it proved much less dense in nutrients than our own hay. This proves the worth of keeping our soils in good heart, because no matter how late we take off the hay, the content could surpass other hay taken off a less rich soil.

Lambing is about finished. We had no triplets this year. Maw, our lighter-faced Dorset ewe, gave birth to twins. Maw is the oldest of our ewes at between eight and ten years old. In the past she has been an excellent milk producer and mother, often allowing any lamb to feed on her. Sadly, this year she had trouble giving birth. We lost one and saved the other for forty eight hours, only to loose the lamb when Maw had no more milk to support her son. When these things happen, we know it is time to say thank you and goodbye, and it is hard.

Meanwhile, twins Bandit and Zeus, are successfully bottle-feeding, as their mother’s udder became sore and bruised due to their death-grip, which she endured for twenty fours before giving up feeding them. The sheep shearer came last Saturday, and all except the new born lambs were given a hair cut. The goats start birthing their kids this month. We invite you to come and view the many forms of new life, including the numerous wildflowers. Such a visit is sure to be an unbeatable “Spring Tonic.”

"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*.