



Farm Connection

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AUCTION BID TAKES BIDDER BY SURPRISE

It was a happy day last Saturday at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road as families gathered to experience an old fashioned day on the farm at our annual Harvest Fair. The crowd began to swell by lunchtime, as the sun emerged from the clouds. The vista from the grassy lane to the pond and cattle field, aglow with autumn colors, combined with the special aura of farm and families, was beautiful.

Lines formed beside the gazebo for the perennial favorite wagon ride, drawn by two white Percherons. The cider press continued to be a hit, as the samples were devoured almost as quickly as the apples were pressed. In the orchard, children wandered amongst the trees and fed the hens. One four-year old returned three times to stay as long as possible and gently hold a hen. He became fascinated with hens after new neighbors moved in and encouraged him to come and visit their flock. His father expressed relief he wasn't spending as much time in front of the television.

April Hoy, Stratford's camp coordinator, had a similar experience in the North pasture. She was prepared to operate a puppet show but found the kids were far more interested in painting the hexagonal picnic table, or cutting up clear plastic bottles and filling them with greens, compost and worms, to create a worm bin.

The noon auction generated much excitement as the auctioneer used his skill to encourage bidding on tools, half a dozen month-old fluffy Araucana chicks with reddish-colored wings, a lamb, a throne-like wooden chair, and heirloom quilts. The woman next to me bid on the chicks without a thought to where she would keep them. She got them! After consultation with assistant farmer Gabe Ross, who agreed with her they would not thrive in a corner of her friend's industrial building, she kindly donated them back.

I too was caught up in the excitement, and misunderstood the same bidder when she urged, "You bid on the lamb." I shot my hand up and bidding jumped to a hundred and fifty dollars. It was too late when I realized she wanted me to buy the lamb for myself, when I thought she wanted me to bid for her. What was I going to do with a whole lamb with no freezer and a small family!! Fortunately, the bidding continued to around two hundred and twenty dollars and every time the auctioneer looked at me I shook my head.

A new addition was a Cake Walk suggested by volunteer Sue Harter. Half a dozen home-made cake walks later the idea was deemed a great success.

Last month's weather was a repeat of every month this year – rain, rain and more rain, never abating long enough to allow the fields to dry out. Some crops, like the red clover in field 2, are growing well in response to the moisture. Unfortunately, it is too late to make hay or graze the field as it is one of the few unfenced on the farm.

The school children explored between the rows of corn, delighting in finding wooly worms and being out in the open air, and it was easy to see that the fat ears were also benefiting from the rains. The kids peeled back the silks and husk and used their nails to check the hardness of the kernels. They were quite soft and Farmer Jeff Dickinson doesn't expect a corn harvest until November.

We opened field 7 for grazing, with the intention of keeping the animals out there well into fall and enabling us to conserve our hay stock for the winter. It's time to plant the spelt for harvest next summer, but with little dry weather we are concerned it will go in too late and be stunted by the first frost. Spelt plays a major part in our feed ration.

The price of both corn and soybeans continues to be very high, as we know only too well after having bought in both recently for winter feed. We will have to re-evaluate how many animals we want to carry through the winter and still be economically viable.

The winter greens have been planted in the greenhouse and are a welcome sight for those of us who crave greens during the cold months. We invite you to check them out and return to buy when they get a little bigger. The Children's Garden continues to flourish with scarlet runner beans climbing the arbor and loofah sponges dangling on top, striking the unwary heads of those who pass below.

Mating started for the ewes this week, with the intent that the first lambs will arrive in early March. Roxy, the sow and her three babes are doing well. They are not in the least afraid of people, and come right up to the side of the pen to check for food. The piglets have latched onto only two of Roxy's teats, which are now obviously swollen. It is quite usual for a piglet to favor one spigot. Seventy-five day-old chicks, including yellow New Hampshire, blue egg-laying reddish colored Araucana, and black Wyandotte Silver Lace, arrived in early September as replacements for our aging hens.

Story Time for young families continues on the farm the second Tuesday of every month from 10am.-11am., \$5/family, with no reservations necessary.

"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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