



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection

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Farm & Nature Guide & Board of Trustees

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A SNAPSHOT OF LIFE AT STRATFORD ECOLOGICAL CENTER DURING A PANDEMIC

Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road continues to be closed to the public in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Farmer Jeff is capably “holding the farm,” with help at times from lone volunteers with special talents like planting vegetable seeds for summer crops, harvesting greens and caring for the greenhouse, raising crickets for the hens, making feed, pruning, erecting the purple martin rigs, and weeding the herb garden. I am sheltering in place and picturing spring unfolding at Stratford. Farmer Jeff brought me up to date by telephone so I can share the constantly evolving life there with you.

The late March and early April weather has been less hard than the last two years, although rain keeps falling regularly and heavily and fills up the ruts yet again. When the land was dry enough to take in machinery Farmer Jeff leveled the North Pasture, Field #6 beside the pond and the Corral, and planted Festulolium, a mixture of meadow fescue and Italian ryegrass. It is a versatile grass that can survive wet conditions and has a longer growing season.

There is enough spring growth in the pasture to allow the animals to graze, and we have not had to buy in any more hay. The cattle, llamas and goats are in the South Pasture and had access to a round bale, but they didn't finish it, a sure sign they are finding enough to eat. The sheep are in the equipment lane between the Corral and South Pasture and have entrance to the North Pasture where they are eating the emerging Festulolium down to its crown. The sheep will eventually be moved on and the grass will tiller and produce a thicker crop.

The greenhouse is “bolting” and is a lush sea of green. Over the last couple of weeks 100 lbs. of greens, dozens of eggs, and potted cold weather plants like broccoli and kale for transplanting into home gardens have been delivered to PIN. With the hens laying four dozen eggs a day there is plenty to go around and the Liberty Community Center and the Second Ward Community have welcomed donations.

April, our Education Director, has taken the egg incubator home in order to supervise the hatching and separation of the chicks. She is no novice at raising chickens, at least in her backyard, and I feel sure she will have no problem adapting to chicks in the house.

Farmer Jeff leveled out the barn yard but did not have a chance to seed, as he was too busy mucking out the goat pen. Out of six nanny goats three birthed in late March and each delivered a set of twins! The first set were strong healthy girls, one black and the other light brown. They think they own the neighborhood and are forever getting out to visit the sheep and the fifteen lambs born safely in March. Luckily the twins find their way back to Mom; if not, their stomachs would quickly empty and they would weaken, leading quite possibly to dire consequences.

Lollipop, the white LaMancha nanny with the apparent lack of ears, was the last of the three to give birth and needed assistance. She dropped her first kid and was so shocked at the experience that she did not attempt to lick off the sack covering his face. Farmer Jeff stepped in and remedied the situation. Shortly afterwards Lollipop took over, and to his amazement she started licking and pushing at the same time and gave birth to her second kid! Mother and babies are doing well.

The early heritage apple trees are in bloom, as are the pears and all the peaches. Stratford has its own micro-climate and often tends to be colder or hotter than surrounding areas. We can only hope there will be no late frosts to wipe out the more tender peaches. It was cold enough at times in the small green house, where we start seedlings, to necessitate opening the door between the warm education building and the greenhouse so the tomato plants will survive. Thankfully, we produce much of our own electricity by solar power so the loss of heat would not have raised our electric bill by very much.

We have a new partner in the American Chestnut Foundation who supplied us with 100 sprouted Chestnut Tree seeds. They will be planted at a depth of half an inch and protected by a cage in various test sites on the property to see where they best flourish.

We all miss being able to visit Stratford and hear on a warm day the loud noises emanating from the vernal pool, witness the daffodils in the parking lot, smell the early blooming spice bushes, or delight at the sight of the jewels emerging in the woodland. But rest assured, just as the sessile or stemless purple trillium still surprise me by blooming every year in the Y at the bifurcation of the Creek and Well Loop Trail, nature will be there for us to enjoy next year. As this month is Ohio Native Plant Month you can find wonderful photos online. Our wish is that you find the good in this down time and stay well.

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