



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection

by
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Published in *The Delaware Gazette*: February 15, 2018

A MIX OF LAMBING, MAPLE SYRUP, AND SOLAR INSTALLATION HAPPENING AT STRATFORD

As wintry weather continues, Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road is forging ahead with preparations for lambing, maple syrup production, and braving the elements to install a new solar system.

The pens in the barn have been cleaned out as the weather allowed, and the manure transported to the expanding pile in the South Pasture. Diatomaceous Earth, a sharp-edged powder made from silica, was spread on the floors as a disease preventative measure. It will absorb fats and oils from any lurking parasites and cause them to die. It is safe should the animals ingest it, and is even used in some human foods, and products like toothpaste.

Fresh straw was strewn in the pens, and the seventeen pregnant ewes immediately started following their maternal instincts and creating nests. Their lambs are imminent. In the distant past Farmer Jeff allowed the ewes to lamb outside in the field. However, after one extremely dark night, with constant pouring rain, when he was out with a single flash light assisting ewes and rescuing lambs from drowning, inside lambing is now the only option.

Two hundred and fifty maple trees were tapped on January 30. Two days later eighty-five gallons of sap was hauled to the sugar shack. With the prospect of continuing freezing temperatures and no sap flow, there was not enough sap to make it worthwhile to gear up the evaporator. Instead the farm hands set out buckets around the evaporator and filled them with the sap. They will freeze, but it will be much quicker to melt them in the fired-up evaporator than deal with a solid block of frozen sap. This week temperatures are expected to rise, and the men will be "cooking" every day, including breakfasts of eggs, corn beef hash, and sausages over a campfire to keep up their strength.

Solar has been the key word at Stratford for the past three weeks. A single solar panel was placed on the roof of the Sugar Shack. It charges a marine battery during the day and runs two LED lights during the night.

The bigger solar project was happening on the farm. I did not think I could get excited, especially wearing tennis shoes, walking over muddy torn-up ground between the Children's Garden and the machine shed, yet I was thrilled this past week. It proved the lines had been laid connecting the solar power from the barn to the machine shed and the meters. If that wasn't enough, a workman pointed to a meter and I could see the number of kilowatts being produced on that cloudy day. It was magic!

The project appears to have happened so quickly, but it has been a rough time for the installers. They have not only dealt with mud but, tethered by harnesses around their chests, they have been dealing with high winds, and at times sweeping snow off the roof to allow the ice to melt so they could install the rails for the panels. It was nerve racking to look up at them, yet they were unperturbed as they worked and carried on a normal conversation! We are most grateful for their fortitude and industry.

Many of the winter greens in the big green house have survived but not attained a decent picking size, except for the prolific miner's lettuce. The house has no internal heating and yet is luxuriously warm whenever the sun peeks out for long enough. Such a free tonic in February! The plants growing in the small green house are ready to eat. The house has the advantage of being attached to the education building. It was re-built last year with no vents, resulting in a ten degree increase in temperature this winter. Retractable shade cloth can be used to control excessive heat.

Training has taken place for Maple Sugar Guides, who will share their knowledge with the public today and lead eager adults and children through the woods to the sugar shack. Next week school groups will arrive for tours and the start of our winter Messages from the Earth program. There is still time to sign up for public tours on Saturday, February 24, as well as our annual Maple Sugar Breakfast on March 3. This includes a self-guided tour of the farm and walk to the Sugar Shack with volunteer interpreters on hand. Our farm-raised sausage and homemade pancakes make up the menu, and we look forward to welcoming 500 people spread over five hourly servings. We hope you will sign up, and perhaps be fortunate enough to see lambs being born!

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