



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection

by

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TIPPING A FARM HAND?

March eased itself in with light snow showers, and for good measure dumped three inches of snow at the Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road, the day after our annual home-raised Sausage and Pancake Breakfast on March 2. The Breakfast and hike out to the sugar shack, to see the maple syrup process, continue to be very popular. Children enjoyed a rest as they listened to stories beside the campfire and visited the barn on their return. This year no lambs were born yet, waiting until March 8 to start appearing and capturing hearts.

The last family to leave the Sugar Shack included Grandpa, Grandma, their son and daughter-in-law and two granddaughters aged 7 and 12. Ed, a seasoned farm hand, who had been out since early morning, still took time to explain the old methods of extracting sugar, rather than syrup, and forming it into patties for transportation and storage. He demonstrated the use of deer antlers to place hot stones in a hollowed-out tree trunk filled with sap, and they heard the whoosh and saw the steam from the evaporating water. He showed a later method of filling a massive iron cauldron and hanging it over a fire, and then moved on to the intricacies of the modern evaporator tank. Ed obviously passed muster because the older granddaughter asked her grandpa if he had a dollar she could leave as a tip!

There were around 1,450 adults and children visiting the farm during maple sugaring, including Saturday tours, school groups, our Messages from the Earth 5th grade program, and the breakfast crowd. Sugaring tours are now over, but the farmhands continue to cook the sap; this has been a record year for sap production due to the unusual weather.

Unfortunately, it was necessary to buy in more hay. Farmer Jeff purchased 13 round bales each weighing around 1200 lbs. which he stored in the small machine shed. The livestock are eating two bales a week and he is hoping the spring grass will be early this year. Spelt is being fed to the pregnant ewes to increase their nutrition as they prepare to give birth.

The new Nubian goat, Lucy, had a most unusual run in with the cattle. The goats were suffering from cabin fever so were given access to the barn yard. The young cattle came through the partly opened gate into the pen and the two new La Mancha goats and Lucy encountered them for the first time. Lucy became frightened and jumped a small gate into the lambing pen. Farmer Jeff let her out into the back yard only to have the cattle dance their way there and chase her as she struggled through the mud. It was only thanks to Farmer Jeff waving and yelling himself hoarse that they finally moved away from her.

The weather has not been kind to the fall-planted spelt, teasing it with warmth and then chilling it. The seed has germinated and was above ground and green last month but is now brown. Any extra moisture in the ground reduces the amount of oxygen and affects the growth. Time will tell if it survives. The underlying hay crop will not be affected. The Prairie had its annual bush hogging. It's time to prune the apple trees, two of which were lost in the last wind storm. Apple wood is good for smoking all kinds of meat, and there was great enthusiasm for saving it.

Our horned steer weighed in at 1185 lbs. and resulted in a rail or final hanging weight of 785 lbs., so once again our freezers will be full of much welcomed beef. There is also still a plentiful supply of last October's good lamb. The chickens are responding to more day light and eggs were abundant this week.

There is a lot of activity on the west side of the education building. We are drilling a geo-thermal well to replace half of our existing loop which failed after nearly 28 years.

Vegetable seedlings to be transplanted into the big greenhouse are growing well under lights in the classroom. Our Spring Garden Day is scheduled for Saturday, March 30. On offer is an Organic Gardening class for adults as well as a separate one for children, a Fruit Tree and Bramble Pruning class, and a Forest Garden for Kids, when they explore the natural areas at Stratford. Further details can be found on our web site and registration is required.

With the sun peeping out more frequently, salamanders stirring, and a vernal pool tour set for Friday, April 5 at 6:30 pm, it is an opportune time to make a visit to Stratford. Like the goats you can relieve your cabin fever, but without the fear of being chased by frisky steers!

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