



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection

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A WONDERLAND IN OUR STATE NATURE PRESERVE

The long lane through the woods at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road was clear of fallen twigs and potholes as I drove in last week, thanks to a farmhand with a strong blower and some gravel. We find it pays to maintain it frequently, especially when the snow flies in January. The golden leaves remain on the young beech trees, appearing like ballerinas with layered tutus beside the bare trees. As I parked, a resident red-tail hawk perched on a birdbox made no attempt to fly away.

Stratford's Founders Jack and Louise Warner wanted the area to remain in its natural state. They applied to the Natural Areas and Preserves, a Division within the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, for permission to dedicate the land as a Preserve in order to be held in trust and protected by the State. In many cases Preserves are owned by the State, but a few like ours are privately owned with maintenance expenses covered by the owners. Due to our rare collection of wild blue hyacinths, we were approved, and a 95-acre portion of our land is designated a State Nature Preserve.

The extensive Preserve stretches from our western boundary on Liberty Road and encompasses the vernal pool and the woods on either side of the lane, almost as far as the Sugar Shack. School children and farm campers enjoy its many paths, and visitors are welcome whenever the Center is open.

An oak tree fell near the vernal pool. The farmhands sawed it into transportable lengths and used the Kubota RTV to haul the logs to the Sugar Shack to season for use in 2022. It was a lot easier to cut wood in 40-degree temperatures than during the sweaty 90-degree days last summer! In the past a tractor was used but it caused a lot of damage to the vegetation making the Kubota a much better choice.

The last of the corn has been harvested in field 7 and the area opened up to all the livestock for grazing. They wander back through the South Pasture to the barn whenever they need a drink, as keeping the water tank in the field free of ice is a losing battle. Corn stubble and grass regrowth is still available in field 4, with more grass available in field 5. The longer we can keep the animals on pasture the longer our hay supplies will stretch into the spring. Once again, the high quality and quantity of our hay was affected by the wet spring and dry summer. We have purchased eight round bales for the cattle to meet their needs for four weeks.

Farmer Jeff and three farmhands had fun and games loading two pigs to take to Heffelfinger Meats in Mansfield on December 8. The spotted pigs have always been a lively pair, along with their five brothers and sisters, whenever anyone approaches their pen. They like to stand on their hind legs and push their heads over the rail to discover what Halloween pumpkins, acorns, or squash might be coming their way.

The two pigs looked to be around our desired market weight of 200 lbs. but only averaged 180 lbs., although the meat yield exceeded the usual 50% of live weight. Their lean and muscular frame allowed one of them to squeeze Houdini-like under a gate and escape outside the barn. The men fooled him into walking back through a side door and soon after both pigs climbed the ramp into the trailer.

As we were out of roasted soybeans for the next feed mix, Farmer Jeff detoured on his way home from Mansfield and picked up 2,500 lbs. of beans in Wooster. We make feed every month for the chickens and pigs in our mixer/grinder powered by the PTO on the big tractor. The recipe calls for 1,000 lbs. of corn including cobs, 10 bales of spelt hay, 500 lbs. of soybeans, 50 lbs. of calcium, 50 lbs. of kelp and 25 lbs. of Redmond mineral salt.

The recent sale of gift bags containing our honey and maple syrup was popular. Never fear if you are running low as we still have stock, and there is another sale in the planning stage for January. At that time there will also be pork, and likely more beef.

My "Stratford year" ended on a high as I saw a bald eagle for the first time at Stratford, identified by its white head and white tail feathers, circling the pond and then turning south, presumably returning to its nest at Highbanks Metro Park. We extend our best wishes to all for the Holiday Season and a Healthy, Happy New Year.

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