



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection by Pauline Scott Farm & Nature Guide & Board of Trustees

Published in *The Delaware Gazette*: February 2021

NEW STORYBOOK TRAIL TO SUGAR SHACK

This month last year at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road the fields were water-logged, the lane to the pond was a mass of ruts filled with muddy water, and the barn yard was a blanket of mud. In contrast, this month's well-below-average temperatures have resulted in frozen ground and a lingering thick layer of snow that keeps the air temperature much colder.

The below freezing daytime temperatures have impeded the start of the sugaring season. It has also affected the start of our Farm School for 6-8 years old, scheduled to begin on February 16 but postponed due to heavy snow. We hired three female education interns who started on February 8. They plan to teach the youngsters how to drill into a maple tree trunk, push in a spiel and hang a bucket.

The farmhands will tap the majority of 180 designated trees, far less than the record setting 308 maples tapped last year. It could be February 22 before temperatures rise, and even later until there is enough sap to warrant firing up the evaporator in the Sugar Shack. In the meantime, the farmhands will demonstrate older methods of evaporation by filling a hollowed-out log with sap and dropping hot stones into it or hanging a cauldron over the campfire. One thing for sure is that the students will make pancakes on grills set up in the Big Room and drench them with our plentiful supply of last year's syrup.

A Storybook Trail, using the book "Spring for Sophie" by Yael Werber, is almost ready for its debut. The route begins at the Sugar Shack trail near the barn and ends in sight of the Sugar Shack. The book's pages have been laminated, secured to a poster board mounted on an H-shaped metal frame, and will be spaced at intervals short enough to hold a child's attention. The story takes Sophie from winter into spring and invites her to use her five senses to check for the arrival of spring. There is a fun activity suggested under each page. The book and location will change with the seasons. The trail project is being spear-headed by Susan, a Messages from the Earth volunteer, after she and her young grandchildren enjoyed similar trails in the Columbus Metro Parks.

The weather has not deterred a number of farmhands from working hard in the orchard and pruning the heritage apple trees, along with two pear trees in the Children's Garden. They have greatly lowered their height by giving them a crew cut. These old trees will respond to the increase in light and space by producing a bumper crop this year unless late frosts interfere! The school children love picking and eating apples, and they will have an easier time reaching them.

Rusty, our 13-year-old ram, had to be euthanized in January. He was a true gentleman and fathered hundreds of lambs, some of whom remain in our flock today. Our first lambs, twins, were born on January 13, since then there have been 10 single births, with 8 ewes yet to lamb. The ewes are in good condition and as a result the lambs are healthy. One lamb is so strong he was able to bounce about within a half hour of birth. At birth, the newborn and mother are housed in their own pen to bond. Recently the lambs and ewes were integrated with the flock who remain secured in the barn. Now Farmer Jeff has to count them each morning to make sure there are no unannounced arrivals!

The goats and llamas have access to outside but prefer to stay in the barn. The cattle wander out to field 6 and pull hay from a round bale secured on top of a portable four-wheel wagon converted for the purpose. The last two pigs left for the processors on February 16. They fared better after their three 225 lb. alpha roommates left in mid-January. Their characters changed and they began claiming they were King of the Hill. They were able to eat more, which satisfied and calmed them, and weighed in at 200 lbs. The portable chicken coop is now empty. The 13 hens were returned to the Paw Paw coop because one hen has short legs and a fat body and was unable to walk up the ramp at night. Farmer Jeff could not always find her, and he was afraid she would become dinner for some creature.

We ended the year with 20 beehives. Presently the bees are clustered tightly inside and vibrating to generate warmth. The beekeepers hope that the honey they fed in December and the Fondant icing in January will provide them with enough food. Once the temperature reaches 40 degrees, they can check the food situation and treat for varroa mite. Meanwhile, after the snow stops, they will clear the hive entrance to ventilate the hive to prevent moisture build up and allow space for any dead bees to be pushed out. A new monthly program called "Meet the Pollinators" begins on Saturday, March 20, from 1-3 pm. with details and sign up on our web site.

There are many individuals, partners and corporations who support Stratford with their financial contributions. As a non-profit organization dedicated to educating children about their relationship with the environment, we are grateful for this tremendous help that allows us to continue our mission. We would like to recognize American Electric Power of Ohio Foundation who stepped up to the plate two years ago and covered our expenses for a new geothermal system, followed by generous annual funding for our STEM initiatives. Thank you.

There are openings for our Farm School for ages 6-12 as well as Farm Preschool for ages 4-5 through May. Starting on the Spring Equinox and successive third Saturdays the following programs will be available: Meet the Predators; Stratford Market Days; and Regenerative Agriculture 101. On Mondays Learning POD Self-Guided Experiences will be available for groups of 10 or less. On Fridays, a guided farm and field trip relevant to age is now being offered. Please check our website for full details and registration. I encourage you not to forget to appreciate the beauty of this snowy winter whether you simply look out the window or venture outside.

Pauline Scott is a farm and nature guide at Stratford Ecological Center, 3083 Liberty Road, Delaware. She can be reached at 740 363 2548 or by email at info@stratfordecologicalcenter.org Stratford's website is www.StratfordEcologicalCenter.org

Stratford Ecological Center
3083 Liberty Road • Delaware • Ohio • 43015
740-363-2548 • info@stratfordecologicalcenter.org
www.stratfordecologicalcenter.org