



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

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

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WILL IT BE WEEDS OR CORN KNEE HIGH BY THE FOURTH OF JULY 4th?

Farmers are at the mercy of the weather and Stratford Ecological Center's farmer, Jeff Dickinson, was bemoaning the fact we had four inches of rain in the last two weeks of June. It meant the corn, which we all hoped would be more than knee high by today, had its roots submerged in water, preventing oxygen absorption and optimum growth. The weeds took advantage of our inability to run a cultivator through the rows, for fear of compaction, and once again are ahead of us. However, this week we were able to cultivate and break down the crust on top of the soil, which prevents air and water from penetrating the soil. We used a Lilliston cultivator with spider-like wheels to break the soil into little clods, rather than pulverizing it, creating soil mulch which takes longer to re-crust. A few more cultivations and we should be on top of the weed problem.

The lighter rain this week has been good for the spelt, and now we hope for dry weather to complete ripening. Combining is scheduled around July 7. In an unusual reversal, the oats will not be ready to combine until July 21. The ragweed is shorter than usual in the oat field and this means less green matter will enter and possibly strain the mechanism of our aged combine. We could cut the five acres of oats and nutrient-rich ragweed immediately, and make 500-600 bales of hay, but even light rain prevents this.

The bottom fields of alfalfa, near Rt. 23, have five percent of their flowers in bloom. We will take our second cutting of the season for hay, when twenty five percent are in bloom. Each time a stem is cut or grazed, a similar amount of root dies and becomes humus in the soil. New roots grow, absorb nutrients, and pass them onto the growing stem. Therefore, the second cutting or grazing is of a higher quality than the first. Mother Nature has cleverly provided a less-rich first flush of grass to allow time for a grazing animal's digestive system to acclimate.

Only the sunflowers are coming through strongly where we planted them with buckwheat. It's a pity about the buckwheat because it usually does well and provides a large part of our feed. The hay taken off the end of the same field was not good enough to store and we found a valuable use for it as mulch in the Giving Garden and the tomato and pepper field.

No doubt it was very amusing to those who watched the hens being moved to their newly renovated home in the orchard by three to five year olds attending summer camp. Christa Hein, our Education Director, demonstrated how to lean over the hen's back, place an arm over each wing to ensure it could not fly away, then lift and carry it. Eighty percent of the children were game to do this, no mean feat for such youngsters! We took a hit on egg production that night. Only two eggs from 55 hens! The reason is that hens do not like a change in routine. Once settled they had a noticeably enhanced energy level and were "just happier," thanks to the new grass, insects, shade of the apple trees, and the protection the thick hedge provides from hawks.

Sugar, our milk cow, weaned herself from her calf, Molasses. Sugar is due to calf again in October as a result of artificial insemination. Four kids from goats, Liberty and Ruby, were weaned after eight weeks and their milk is being made into cheese or drank by those who appreciate the flavor. The kids, all boys, are enjoying life together adjacent to the front lawn. The thirteen piglets are thriving! The runt is still the runt but he's keeping up with his siblings. Mom, Roja and sister, Rosie are looking good, as well they should be after the fine time they had plowing up the barn yard with their snouts. Roja, big as she is, was observed lying full length in the water tank and afterwards rolling her belly in the mud. The yard looks like a four wheel drive has been driven around for hours on a wet day. We have rethought our strategy, and in future only the piglets will be allowed out!

Three new students joined us in June to complete our summer quota of Agriculture and Education interns. They are an interesting mix of young people. Each one looking for new experiences as they continue with their college education in areas of veterinary medicine, ecotoxicology and parks and recreation. Stratford has plenty to share this month and I encourage you to go to our web site at www.stratfordecologicalcenter.org and read our July e-mail update to find out what is happening and the produce in season. There are plenty of "cool" spots to hang out, including the gazebo, where Sue Harter has planted a scented garden of geraniums, lavender and lemon verbena.

"Farm Connection" is a monthly article connecting city folk to life on the Stratford Ecological Center farm. It is published on the first Saturday of the month on the farm and garden page of *The Delaware Gazette*.

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