



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection

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PULLING CATTAILS DOES NOT INVOLVE CATS

Last Tuesday, September 1, was an exceptionally pretty late summer day at Stratford Ecological Center. In the north pasture a line of Queen Anne Lace and pink clover glowed beside the fence. They were survivors, a month ago the field was cut using the bush-hog, before the ragweed flowered and produced pollen, the bane of asthma sufferers.

The same day, two college students were making, they hoped, a final tour of the new electric fencing. It has taken a lot of effort during the last two months to dig post holes and string wire to make a better division of the land. They were checking to see that rubber insulators, installed to avoid grounding, were in place between the double wires secured to the last two fence posts. They used special clamping shears to attach short insulated wire between three of the five strands that would become the “live” wires.

These shock the animals just enough they will not try to break through the fence. This method of fencing is cheaper and more portable than the traditional boards and posts. The orchard grass and alfalfa continue to grow well in this cooler summer weather and ample dew. Orchard grass is referred to as a spring and fall grass as it grows best when it is not too hot. In fact, it prefers the shade of fruit trees, hence its name. Alfalfa is a more sturdy forage legume and acts as an umbrella for the orchard grass, especially when the grass first sprouts in the spring. Next year the field will be in corn and this fall we will allow the pigs into the field. They use their snouts, as cultivators, to tear up the ground looking for grubs and roots, which, unlike the barn yard, does not present a problem.

The oats and barley growing on top of the peas have been combined for feed grain. The peas have been cut and baled for hay. Foxtail grass has grown waist high amongst the buckwheat and sunflowers, creating a headache for combining. Meanwhile, the gold finches are flying atop the sunflowers and making a golden spectacle. The corn continues to look fantastic.

In mid August volunteers were invited to help clean up the pond beside the prairie. Originally the land was contoured so the rain water would drain from the fields, through the prairie, and into the pond. The system works fine. However, in order for the pond to be accessible and safe for children, to discover its inhabitants, we made it shallow at the edge. This is a grave mistake if you want an open pond. Reed-like marsh plants, with flowers in long, dense cylindrical spikes, resembling cats’ tails, love to settle in at the edge of shallow ponds and gradually take over. Rather than drain the pond and loose the bluegill and bass, dropped in as eggs by birds, and other pond life, we decided our first line of attack should be to pull out the cattails and floating weed around the wooden dock.

The “Brownie Queen” arrived with her pan of warm sustenance, seemingly suitably shod in a pair of borrowed knee length Wellington boots, and ready to tackle the cattails. Along with others, in their swim suits and sneakers or waders, she stepped a few feet out into the pond. The mud immediately sucked down her wellies which filled with water and she lost her balance and fell over backwards!

Luckily, her head remained above water, I think. The afternoon wore on, people were up to their necks in the cool water, and despite the hard work it was a fun, dirty way to spend a warm day.

Bob Harter is the prairie specialist at Stratford. He is very mindful of the need to grow native prairie plants to provide an abundance of nectar for the many species of native wasps, bumble bees and butterflies. These insects pollinate many flowering plants and trees, including apples, strawberries, pumpkins and squash. Native bees, honey bees and butterflies are disappearing all over the world due to the use of pesticides, and lack of the right type of plant food. Bob recently planted, beside the gazebo, purple coneflower, obedient plant, butterfly milkweed, dense blazing star, rattlesnake master, wild petunias and foxglove-beards tongue. We are thankful to him and like-minded people, who have spent decades preserving plants to feed the insects who pollinate our food source. Egg numbers are still down. It is time to buy in day old chicks to start laying eggs in the spring. We will keep the older hens and hopefully rotate them around the pastures in a chicken house on wheels. It is doubtful whether a couple of two year old Jersey steers have reached their 1,000 lbs. market weight and processing may be delayed. We are hoping to exchange two of our young ram lambs for a mature ram to use this fall.

For the first time Stratford will enter a float in the All Horse Parade in Delaware on Sunday, September 13, from 3 pm to 5 pm. Our young Eco Explorers have teamed up with adult volunteers to create a float reflecting life "Down on the Farm." The theme will continue at our annual Harvest Fair, when the farm is transformed into a playground and celebrates the season. The Fair is scheduled for Saturday, October 3, from 10 am to 4 pm. Admission \$6 for adults, \$4 for children 2-12. We would love to see you there.

"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*.

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