



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection
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STEERS TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SUGAR'S GOOD NATURE

The young Eco Explorers, dressed in jeans and cowboy hats, from Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road, gradually lost their shyness. They began waving to the crowd as they rode on a wagon pulled by Walter Calvin's two Percheron's, in the Delaware All Horse Parade. The youngsters turned out the day before to drag straw bales across the yard and heave them onto the wagon. They made trips to the children's garden to find peppers, egg plants, cucumbers, squash and pumpkins to decorate and dived into the straw bale shed to retrieve vegetable signs and miniature farm equipment. Once the wooden cut-out Holstein cow had been attached to the rear of the wagon, the float truly matched our theme "Down on the Farm."

A black and white Holstein is not usually seen at Stratford. We prefer the smaller honey-colored Jerseys. Presently Sugar, our cow, her daughter, Molasses, and various Jersey steers graze the land. They take up less space in the barn and eat less feed. This is an advantage on a small farm, where pasture for year-round grazing and acreage to grow winter feed is limited. Jerseys are gentle to work with, a big plus for us, as it is quicker to milk one or two by hand than use and wash out the automatic milking machine. The milk is rich and creamy and the calves thrive on it.

We thought Sugar had weaned her calf in July. We had seen her pushing Molasses away. We wanted Sugar to dry off, so the milk nutrients could be used by the calf she is now carrying. All appeared well, except Sugar's udder seemed exceptionally full for a dry cow. Usually this is a sign the calf is due, which was much too early. The mystery was solved when Jeff Dickinson, Stratford's farmer, was feeding hay to Sugar, two one-year-old steers and Molasses. To his astonishment he noticed all three were taking advantage of Sugar's good nature and topping up their hay with a dessert of warm milk. There is now a full field between them, and Sugar is putting on weight as her udder shrinks.

True to his word Farmer Jeff has purchased day-old chicks to supplement our egg supply in the spring. They arrived courtesy of the U.S. Mail Service – a seemingly extra-ordinary way to receive young birds. However, the method works, as the chicks are so young they have enough stored nutrients and can survive for 24-48 hours. Ideally, they should be mailed first thing in the morning and delivered the same evening.

We purchased fifty chicks. Light brown colored Comets, which become a mottled white and brown, and black Barred Rocks which eventually become a black and white mix. The groups arrived at different times and socialization was not instant. One cute chick left its group and approached another, only to be rebuffed. Fortunately, this behavior did not last long.

Five ram lambs went off to the processors this past week. Demand for the meat is high and we will have no problem selling it. If we don't exchange the two remaining ram lambs for a ram this fall, we plan to borrow a ram in January, after he finishes mating on another farm, to mate with our ewes. It means we will have a later lambing season than usual, starting in mid May rather than mid January. Rosie, our sow, is looking large and lethargic, rather than large and giving birth. Our hopes for a litter may be dashed as she is getting beyond the time frame of birth.

Rain, colder temperatures and the possibility of frost, in our pocket of Delaware County, have put a damper on field work. If we experience an Indian summer we may try and combine harvest the buckwheat and sunflowers, despite the invasive foxtail grass, for additional winter feed. The animals will pick over the unappetizing foxtails like kids finding onion in their stew. Alternately, we may mow them down, knowing full well the buckwheat and sunflowers will re-seed next year. In the spring we will plant an oat/alfalfa mix in the same field and in July combine everything together.

One thing we have to plant is spelt for next winter's animal feed. An acre is ready for sowing, where we grew peas. However, the south pasture, now part of the new crop rotation in effect since the fencing was completed around the permanent pasture, is only loosely broken up. It needs three more passes to disk, chisel and harrow before planting. We will certainly make the proverbial hay if the sun shines in the next few weeks.

Today is Harvest Fair at Stratford. The Farm becomes a playground to celebrate the seasons. It is one of Stratford's two annual fundraisers. The other is the Maple Sugar Festival in March. This year's theme is "Down on the Farm" with wagon rides, mustang rides, cider making, farm auction, living history village, paper making, candle dipping, corn hole, kid's parade and plenty of food, including Stratford's Brats, Gabby's pizza, and Bank's BBQ. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Adults \$6, children \$4 ages 2-12. Hope you can join in the fun.

"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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