



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection

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MISTAKEN IDENTITY RESULTS IN ROOSTER'S RETURN TO FARM

It was a pleasure to experience not one, but two Indian summers this fall at the Stratford Ecological Center farm located on Liberty Road. After the October frosts we feared winter would arrive early, yet we found ourselves reveling in the warm days of November. It meant the corn could be harvested on schedule using the one-row corn picker. That's a slow but steady method of harvesting and beats hand picking!

Yields averaged thirty bushels per acre where we failed to cultivate in time due to weather, and a satisfying fifty bushels per acre from the north boundary field. This yield is perhaps half as much as an average conventional farmer but we do not apply fertilizers and chemicals, and our expenses are much less. Much of the corn remains in a wagon, sheltered in the machinery shed, with the remainder outside in a circular wire corn crib, partially wrapped in a blue tarp to fend off the rain.

Thanks to the weather and the increase in the number of fenced paddocks, the animals have spent more time grazing this fall. By now the grass is very low but utilizing it, instead of hay, has conserved our supply of hay. The hogs' time in the pasture came to a swift end. It wasn't because they rooted up the softer earth near the gateway, rather than snuffling over the whole field, but as a result of the three piglets great escape.

Stratford volunteer Gwyn and I were sitting on an old fence post we had retrieved from the adjacent woods, basking in the sunshine, when a fat, brown four-legged animal better know as Babe, sprinted around the corner. Close on his cloven heels galloped two more Babes. They took no notice of us as they passed by and entered the woods. A cell phone call to the office confirmed the little rascals had once again detected a reduction in strength of the electric fence and slipped under the bottom wire. Until the short could be discovered the only thing to do was herd their mother, older sister, and the piglets back to the farm. Despite additional manpower, it was not as easy to return them to the barn as it was for them to leave it.

The Cornish-cross meat chicks are chicks no longer. They are amazingly large, with a thick coat of white feathers. It is easy to compare their growth to the laying chicks in the other half of the shed. It is evident the Cornish-crosses are growing more than twice as fast, and will be grown by late December. No doubt their speed of growth is all a matter of genes.

At the Harvest Fair, we auctioned a starter flock of six laying hens and suspecting nothing amiss sent them off to the highest bidder. One of the hens plumped out much quicker than the others and a little comb started to form on top of its head. "She" was discovered to be a "He" and sent back immediately to Stratford to be replaced by a hen. Jeff Dickinson, our farmer, thinks the bidder had either enough alarm clocks or did not realize the value of a rooster for increasing egg production just by being around. "He" is a handsome Barred Rock with black and white feathers and resides once again with our own young hens.

The final school group of the year split into smaller groups for a three-hour tour including lunch on the trail, or beside the pond, or children's garden, or the most popular spot of all, the hayloft. Here the children scrambled up as high as they could on the stacked bales. No sooner had they opened their lunch boxes than Max, the friendliest of our cats, arrived to help them eat it. It became somewhat of a battle between the girls and the cat but the boys finished quickly and spent the rest of the time enthusiastically sliding down the bales.

Another group of enthusiastic visitors, this time at the other end of the age spectrum, came out to see us. Lois Smith arranged for residents from Willow Brook Christian Community to visit and familiarize themselves with Stratford and its ecological mission. There was lots of laughter as folks shared their own farming backgrounds and we tried to imagine how the majority of children would cope today. We realized the many skills of yesteryear are coming back into fashion as people recognize the benefits of becoming more self-sufficient.

The visit ended with a tour around the farm buildings in the mini-bus with narration by farm-raised, David Hoy, Stratford's Development Director. The mini-bus provided excellent viewing and I don't know who was most curious or stared more intently, Fuzzy the new Billy goat, and the nanny goats, with their heads between the fence, and one steadily chewing her cud like a child chewing gum, or those behind the windows?

We will be closed on Saturdays throughout December and January. The Staff will take a break over the holidays and Stratford will close from December 24 through January 2. Why not take a break yourself and come see us before the 24th, or we hope to see you in the New Year. Good wishes from all of us down on the farm.

"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*.