

On being a farm wife - And other hazards

Joyce Bupp



Exists there a machine, anywhere, without a streak of malice toward females?

Odds are that such a thing might be found somewhere. But I've yet to cross its path. Or is it just my own technological ignorance that sends signals to mechanical marvels to go berserk at a mere touch?

This summer, it's the lawn

mower.

Heavy-duty, riding-mowers have been standard equipment for the backyard expanse here on the farm almost since the time we moved in. We've put a lot of miles on, those riders and I, keeping up with the national obsession for cropped, green lawn.

Actually, it's generally more of a continuing battle against inva-

sion by lambsquarters, pigweed and the toughest crabgrass east of the Ohio state line. Most of the lawn lays low and naturally damp, growing thick, quick and green, even while other lawns nearby cringe beneath brittle brown blades.

So, our lawn mowers earn their keep. But they never miss a chance to protest to the one who most frequently steers them into briar-and-bramble battle.

Blessed is the mower which turns over the first time as I shove the gas feed to the max and choke down to the precise spot at which the clattering motor runs the most evenly.

We roar across the side lawn, leaving a neatly clipped swath behind us, and push ahead the variable speed thingamajig.

All is well — for at least 20 feet. Then the mower slowly glides to a halt, motor still throbbing and blades biting viciously at grass already lopped to a life-threatening

low.

In defiance to the sudden temper tantrum of third gear, I switch down to second. No second. No first, either. And the clutch what-chamacallit clutches only with great reluctance.

But — rejoice! — we still run in reverse.

Still, the prospect of mowing, in reverse, a quarter-acre of angled, chopped-up, tree-, walk-, and building-interrupted lawn has about as much appeal as playing in a hornet's nest.

Fortunately the farmer is nearby moving hay into the barn. To my lament, he murmurs something about a clutch belt, sprawls in the grass to adjust some doohickey in the mower's belly, and the clutch clutches once more.

But the blades only slice farther down into the lawn's roots and no gear takes hold. Yanking the variable thingamajig, he whips it back and forth, until at the "race" speed, it grabs hold. We charge into gear with only a hint of whiplash.

At least mowing in "race" is better than mowing in reverse.

Three race circles around the lawn later, a faint but familiar sputtering emanates from somewhere under the fiberglass hood. Experience says this has nothing to do with the thingamajig, the whatcha-

macallit or the doohickey.

A mowing or two previous, I corralled the 6-foot family baby to rescue me from mower desertion, after the sputter began to smoke. He jiggled a few wires, furrowed his brow over the battery and actually considered my hesitant query about whether it needed water or if the cables might be loose.

Then it ran fine. After a male had practiced some sort of mechanical witchcraft over the cursed motorized mower.

This time, the farmer himself invoked a few of the same incantations, stuck a needle-nosed oil can into a few strategic spots, shrugged his shoulders and mowed a couple of rounds with a mower running like a dream. Still at "race" speed.

By finishing in second gear "race," I managed to finish just ahead of the mower curse, and only a faint and occasional threatening sputter.

There are a good three months of mowing left in the season. This particular mechanized motor and I must find some sort of understanding or we will revert to a lawn of wildflowers and thistle.

Either that, or some day I may be sorely tempted to practice a new version of mower witchcraft — with a piece of two-by-four.

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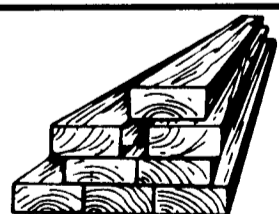
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