

# On being a farm wife - And other hazards

Joyce Bupp



"Do you always have this many?" asked a friend, visiting a few weeks ago on a pleasant October afternoon.

An avid feeder of squirrels, she and her family were gleaning a few ears of corn from one of our fields that had been harvested for silage. What she had noticed "so many" of were woolly bear caterpillars, those brown and fuzzy larvae that actually lend some meaning to the phrase "cute as a bug." And, yes, at least here on the farm, woolly bears seem more prevalent this fall than they have for the past

several years.

The first one I saw came crawling through in mid-August, which seemed like an ominously early start for a caterpillar that supposedly foretells winter weather forecasts. And, since mid-September, they seemed to be everywhere.

Each trip to the garden turns up woolly bears. They are on the porches, in the flower beds, in the basement, in the laundrybasket. One day last week, I nearly squashed — except for quick sidestepping — two woolies crawling

northward up the blacktop grade between the calf nursery and the old bank barn.

Folklore has it that the black to brown ratio of color on a woolly bear is an indicator of the coldness of winter. The more black, the colder the winter. It sounds nice, but our woolies are wearing a whole fashion statement of stripe widths. Some were completely brown. Others were completely black.

My corn-gleaning friend related that she had been told that the black-brown ratio is an indicator of how old the caterpillar was. Curious, I called those experts of just about everything — the folks at the York County Extension Office.

Master Gardener volunteer Sherry Rishel was handy to the phone; she checked some insect manuals and printed material. Sure enough, she found information backing up the black-brown ratio as an indicator of how close to maturity a woolly bear is. Woolly bears, she related eventually become "Isia isabella" moths, two-inch yellowish-brown-colored with random black dots. But, no details turned up on

whether more black or more brown meant the caterpillar was still wet behind the ears or a senior citizen critter.

My friend collected two woolies in jars for her children to observe; overnight, one began to form a mass of silky spinnings and attached itself to the lid. Maybe she can get a grant for further studies.

Until we know more . . . figure it's going to be a long winter.

Meanwhile, another of our permanent resident "bug" species is keeping us decorated in the true, festive spirit of the season. For endless years it seems, I've waged the same battle fought by countless other homeowners and housecleaners.

Spider webs. Dangling from the ceiling. Draped from the curtains.

Linking corners of the living room and ornamenting everything from lampshades to picture frames. Now, along with the wonderful orange pumpkins of the season, the clusters of cornstalks, the "scarecrows" perched on front porches, we have ornamental spider webs. Commercial, imitation spider webs. Gosh, ain't technology grand?

It's sort of a spooky feeling to have been on the cutting edge of Halloween ornamentation. And so early in the year — every year.

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on November 6, from 1:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. and on Sunday, November 7, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

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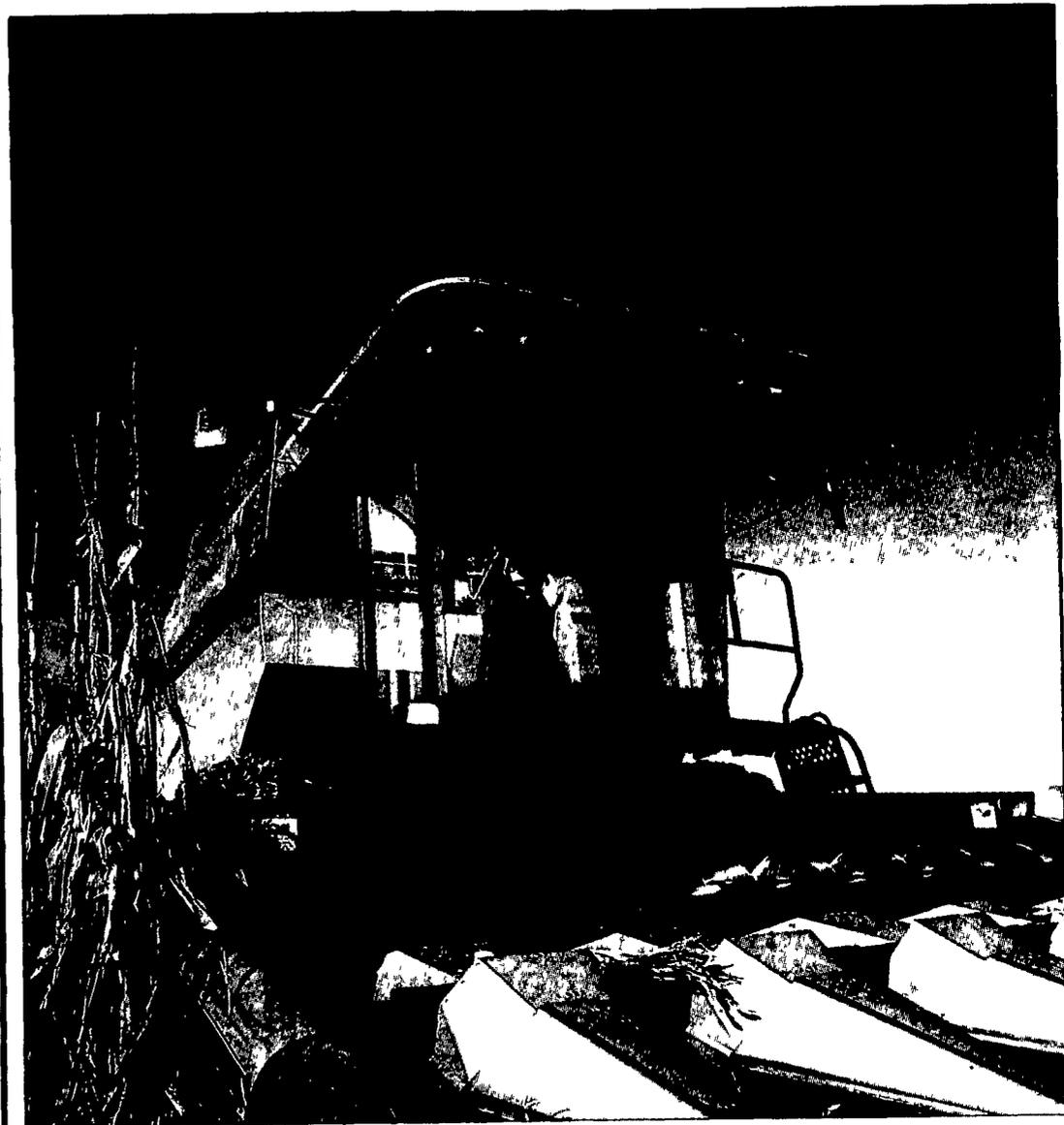
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