

On Being a Farm Wife (and other hazards)

Joyce Bupp



The peepers have come back. "Peepers" are one of the first signs of spring which we listen for. These little marshy-woodland frogs make a loud, chirpy call, which sounds much more like a bird or insect than it does the classic frog "croak."

We didn't hear peepers from the meadow ponds for a couple of years, although we were never sure why. But a few weeks ago their after-dark serenading started up, announcing the time of change to their neighborhood—and ours—as the ponds in the meadow come alive.

Actually there was more activity than usual there all through the winter, since a whole colony of muskrats has claimed squatters rights to the area. They had the ponds pretty much to themselves for many weeks, until the first group of

Canada geese descended onto the melting ice one late February morning, hooting and honking about their arrival.

The Farmer wasn't too impressed with the invasion of the muskrats, since—like most rodents—their tendencies to dig and chew whatever's handy causes considerable damage. In this case, it's to the sides of the ponds, where they excavate houses with entrance, exit and travel burrows, erode banks and cause pond wall weakening. While walking with Derra Dog around the ponds after dark one evening, I nearly fell into a hole where one muskrat burrow had collapsed.

Right behind the geese's arrival came a couple pairs of ducks. Most are mallards, but one elusive stranger we finally identified as a blue-winged teal.

We hoped that it might have a mate nesting somewhere nearby and they would stay on with the rest of the noisy feathered flock.

Our two goose nests where goslings hatched out last spring are again populated with hens glued to their sitting posts. Between them, a flock of about 10 others—maybe last year's youngsters—hang around, the first time we have ever had extra geese in residency while pairs are nesting. One of the nest-guarding males chases them, but only when we go for a walk at the ponds. Guess he has to prove that he's doing his job.

Recently I spotted yet another nest, this one being warmed by a mallard hen, who chose a volunteer willow tree at the goldfish pond as her brooding spot. She built the nest on the bank where the willow has grown a large limb section gracefully dipping down and out just inches from the water surface. The site seemed relatively secluded from passerbys.

Except for the family of last year's kittens, which tag along when Derra and I take our evening walks. We must look like a silly parade: one person, one dog, and several multicolored cats trailing along. Those cats promptly spied the duck nest; she hopped off, quacking and splashing. I coaxed the cats away, vowing to stay clear of the

area until the eggs had hatched. But, a day later, The Farmer noted that she was off the nest and the eggs missing. Raccoon? Fox? Cat? What was the culprit?

Along with the ponds' stirring of animal and bird life comes the return of the plants which we enjoy watching grow and flower, many of which The Farmer has planted over the last several years. Green cattail and rush blades poke up through the dead, brown debris of last year's growth, one big clump piled into a muskrat lodge in the big pond. Japanese and Siberian iris spikes rise up from the edges, while the first wide, round leaves of water-lily plants spread reddish-tinted circles on the sparkling water.

Mowing for the first time around the ponds last week was a pleasurable chore, a chance to observe the meadow ponds coming back to vibrant life. Then I spied yet another pond resident, curled up basking in the sunshine on the willow's big limb hanging out over the water. Just inches from where the duck nest had been, lay a snoozing Mr. (or Ms.) Water Snake.

Do water snakes eat duck eggs? And even if they do, water snakes have a right to be there, too. It's all part of pond life. The good. The bad. The wiggly.

But given a choice, I'd take the ducks over the wiggles.

Compost Piles

The steamy, heaping mass of leaves, twigs and kitchen scraps is nature's kitchen at its best.

In case you've never seen a compost pile, it's a big pile of grass clippings, leaves, kitchen scraps, dirt — just about anything from your garden or yard that you would normally throw in the trash.

Inside the pile, bacteria and other tiny microorganisms feast on all the organic material in the compost pile. (Organic material is naturally made materials, such as leaves, vegetable peels and twigs.) Bacteria release water vapor and heat as they decompose the waste. The added heat helps "cook" or break down the material. Eventually, with the right mix of ingredients, heat and moisture, the compost pile changes into a soil-like mix. The whole process is very similar to how fallen leaves decay in a forest.

So why bother with a compost pile? The finished product is rich in nutrients that the soil needs to grow healthy plants and vegetables.

Plus, composting helps the environment. Food and yard wastes make up about a quarter of the waste going into landfills. By turning it into compost, it all gets recycled for a good use!

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Sweet Meriam's Farm

(Continued from Page B2)

don't want unusual looking tomatoes.

In June, customers can expect boxes full of lettuce, mesclun mix, spinach, chard, collards, kale, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, beets, radishes, turnips, peas, and carrots. In July expect beans, onions, cucumbers, summer squash, tomatoes, peppers, and potatoes. August brings eggplant, cantaloupe, honeydew, and watermelon. In September they can enjoy the cool-season vegetables again while October brings sweet winter squash and pumpkins for pies and carving.

Sweet Meriam's Farm also

offers value-added salad and stir-fry mixes from the state-inspected kitchen in the large stone farmhouse. The mixes are an easy dinner answer for busy families.

"The beauty of fresh-grown food," Markley explains, "is that you don't need long, involved recipes. Fresh vegetables are easier, less time consuming, and have a flavor all their own — you don't need lots of spices and sauces to add flavor."

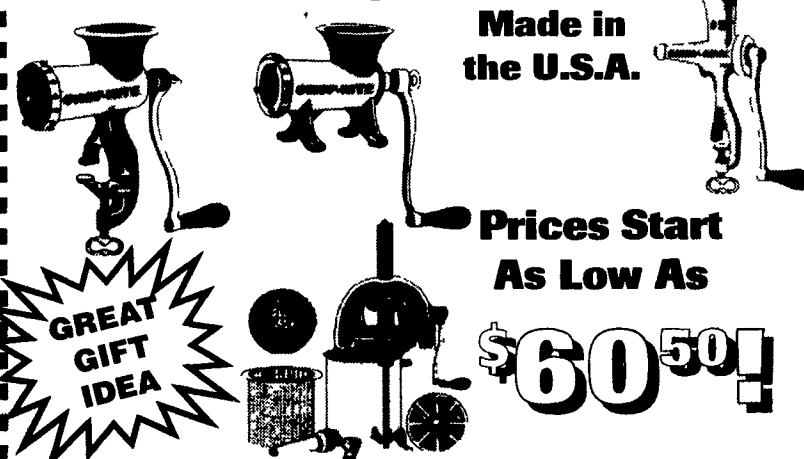
Anyone interested in buying a share or in CSAs can contact Kristen Markley or Nell Hanssen at Sweet Meriam's Farm at (570) 658-8512.

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