

On Being a Farm Wife (and other hazards) Joyce Bupp



the mountain hunting cabin at night, with trees are so tall and thick that even the moon is hard to spot. Darkness is what stretches beyond the house during one of those super-foggy nights in late fall.

Nights are never very dark in our immediate surroundings. Unless the power goes off.

For safety and security reasons, vast numbers of us have dotted our properties with the glow of night lights. These shining white beacons illuminate large patches of dark, pushing back the mysterious blackness and providing daylight-like visibility within their reach.

Bright, white lights not only lighten the dark summer nights, they also allow us to not only hear the screechings and squallings of the tomcats squabbling over territory, but also to see them chasing one another outside the dairy barn. The nightlight at the dairy barn shines the way for an after-dark trip to the milkhouse, so 4 a.m. breakfast is not milk-less cereal. It reassures us that the banging outside the boxstalls is merely from a cow that slipped her neckchain and not one of those wandering black bears that have recently been roaming our area.

Gentle and dark are the summer nights.

Well, sort of.

Most summer nights are gentle, except for times like these July heat blasts, when the daytime temperatures snuggle up near 100 and the nights cool to slightly below 80. Sticky, sultry, or muggy is much more appropriate; maybe just plain down miserable. Nights when sleeping out on the porch seems like a good alternative to the overheated upper levels of an old brick farmhouse. Until mosquitos join the slumber party.

The dog's choice, snoozing on the basement's cool concrete floor, almost sounds more appealing. And, minus the mosquitos.

Nor are summer nights too gentle when blustery thunderstorms, spawned by those conditions, rip across the countryside. But they often do bring needed moisture and at least temporary relief from heat extremes, as Mother Nature rebels against her midsummer mugginess.

Still, both the sticky, sultry nights and moisture-laden thunderstorms boost growth on field crops like corn, soybeans, and hay. Their heat will also help hurry-up the tomatoes we're anxious for and keep that grass that we all love to mow fresh and green.

How dark the nights get, though, depends on one's vantage point. Real darkness is what's outside the windows of

July always provides very special summer lights to dot the darkness.

"A lightning bug!" the grandkids shouted one evening recently, as heating-up nights brought the first fireflies out to blink in search of companionship. "Grandma, let's catch it!"

"Poor bug is probably terrified," chuckled our daughter, as three gleeful sets of hands and feet chased across the grass through deepening dusk to snag the elusive flashing insect. Apparently sensing the imminent threat from too much affection, the firefly promptly switched direction and was last seen crawling beneath a strawberry plant.

Clouds of the phosphorescent beetles hatch out with the onset of hot summer nights. They wink and blink, signalling their presence and eager participation in this annual insect proliferation marathon. Thousands of them,

hovering over the corn rows as dusk slides to night, create a pulsing, sparkling effect that is almost magical.

Pity the kids that never spend a gentle summer night chasing lightning bugs. Even two-year-old Sarah, still not convinced that earthworms are not life-threatening monsters, overcomes her insectophobia long enough to chase "flashlight bugs." Firefly chases offer clean wholesome exercise (those bugs are speedy in search of mates), teaching opportunities (lots of beginner science discussions) and help sharpen observation skills (where will that bug flash next?).

Lightning bugs, like gentle summer nights, are a fleeting, short-lived commodity. And, after our interminably bitter winter, fireflies flitting over the fields are a welcome change from snowflakes.

How blessed we are to be able to enjoy both in their seasons.

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Energy Star is a federal government program designed to help people and businesses protect the environment by increasing energy efficiency. According to Dennis Buffington, professor of agricultural and biological engineering, products that earn the Energy Star label must meet strict criteria — including using less energy than standard products — without sacrificing features, style or comfort.

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"Realistically, homeowners and businesses can increase energy efficiency enough to reduce their energy expenditures by 20 to 30 percent," Buffington said.

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