

From the Bean Pile – On Being Green

By Marj Brady

Being perceived as being “green” is a big deal today. Hundred mile diets, organic anything, buying locally, energy credits and environmental footprints are hot topics and even the big box stores are getting on the bandwagon, trying to find ways to greenify their images. I think we’re all more conscious of how what we do impacts on our environment, but I also think it’s debatable just how “green” farming can be.

When we lived in the city we had two vehicles that weren’t driven much as we had easy access to the subway and transit systems and could walk to the library, schools and some shopping. Now that we’ve moved to the country we have two mini-vans that are in constant use because we have to drive everywhere, a compact tractor that uses diesel, a lawn tractor, electric waterers, pumps, electric buckets, tank heaters and on and on. Needless to say, and despite our best efforts, our fuel consumption is way up.

Our house is over 150 years old and the barn is over 100 – neither is particularly efficient. The house has been reinsulated but is still drafty. We have a woodstove in the kitchen, a propane fireplace in the living room, electric baseboard heat in the addition bathroom and an oil furnace in the main house. The barn can make some claim to an original green movement from way back as the beams, rafters and joists in the

loft, walls and floor were all salvaged from a much older structure. They didn’t consider reclamation to be environmentally sound back then, just smart.

We don’t have straw bale construction or solar panels but we do have cisterns; four of them. Don’t ask me why they didn’t set off alarms in my head when we bought our farm, but I believed the previous owners when they said the well never ran dry. Guess what? We did a flow test in April, bought the property, moved in in July and the well was dry by September. Maybe what they really meant was that mud in the bottom of the well never really dried out. As it turns out, we’re in a water challenged area. We reconfigured the house water to include a trickle system using one of the cisterns so now we usually only have to have water trucked in once a year by a big honking diesel truck. The 5000 gallon cistern in the driveshed is completely rain fed, provides all the outside water and has only run dangerously low once in over five years.

Six years ago I had no idea what a cistern

really was or how they worked, now I have opinions, theories and stories and can ramble on at length about the pros and cons of cisterns and rural water systems.

In addition to spreading our manure pile on our hay fields, we fertilize our pastures so that they’re, hopefully, healthy, strong and productive enough to support our herd without having to feed hay through the summer or fence in new pastures. We use a granular fertilizer which I spread using the lawn tractor and an aerator/spreader, I drive around in little circles forever spreading chemical goodness on my fields, pray for rain, wait a few weeks and let the animals onto the fresh green goodness.

Because the fertilizer usually works very well and because we don’t have a huge herd, the alpacas can’t eat enough to keep the pasture trimmed to a reasonable length and I then have to take out the diesel powered utility tractor with the rotary mower and drive in bigger circles cutting the grass that I so carefully fertilized. Am I the only person who recognizes the absurdity in this?





Alpacas are touted as being the ultimate in “green” livestock. Easy on your pastures, easy keepers, their manure is cold, they don’t eat a lot,

compared to other livestock, and on and on. I don’t know about your animals but my alpacas have worn some significant paths to and from their pastures with

their soft padded feet and their “goes in one spot” communal toilet is morphing into an alpaca shaped Rorschach – can you see it? Maybe it’s just me, maybe I’ve been out in the sun too long, but we actually carried a ladder out to the field late last fall to get that shot. The alpacas were fascinated by the stupid human up a ladder in the middle of their field for about thirty seconds and then wandered off to create new artwork for me to assess and perhaps photograph.

Somedays the closest I get to being green is the spit in my hair and the chaff down my shirt. But that’s alright too, it means that my girls are pregnant and I have good hay to feed them. Organic rock anyone?

CQ

About the Author

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