

# SHANNON BROOK FARM

ORGANIC • PASTURE-RAISED • LOCALICIOUS  
CHICKEN & LAMB

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## Shannon Brook Farm Newsletter

February 16, 2013

Over the past two weeks the farm has undergone a significant transformation. An additional 30 acres is now defined by a high-quality, woven wire sheep fence with a single strand of barbed wire on the outside at the base and a hot, stand-off wire about 12” from the ground on the inside. Prior to having this perimeter fence it felt as though we owned a farm but we couldn’t quite put it into production. For a year and a half we used portable electro-netting as a means of grazing the sheep on different parts of the farm. It worked for the most part but then there were times when it just did not work at all.



*Ewes and lambs grazing inside and electronet in the fall*

The strand of barbed wire on the new fence is meant to keep predators, such as coyotes, from digging under the woven wire to gain access to the sheep. The hot wire on the interior, which is electrically charged, keeps the livestock off of the fence. Sheep and pigs have been known to slowly but surely push their faces through wire fences until the fence literally starts to come apart.

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We had many difficulties with the electro-netting including lambs getting tangled up in it, which meant they were getting shocked by the electric pulse until we could extricate them from the wires. In the meantime they would pull the fence down allowing all of the other sheep to run out along with the livestock guardian dogs. Although the sheep wouldn't go too far the dogs would run quite a distance. Once they went to the neighboring farm and harassed the poor fellow and his horses. The farmer finally persuaded the dogs to come into his barn where they took a break from the severe summer heat and napped on the paved barn floor. He couldn't figure out who owned them so he called the dog catcher. Off to the pokey they went. Another time they ran off to the cross roads of Reading Center and were playing on the highway. A young girl called and asked if we owned three large dogs. A third time they ran away to our friends' house. Fortunately our friends recognized the dogs and called us promptly. As you can imagine, each event was startling, nerve-racking, exhausting and time-consuming. Another shepherd, not prompted by anything we said, told us a one liner about livestock guardian dogs: "What's a Great Pyrenees that is not tied up? Gone." We get it.



*Woven wire sheep fence*



Now that we have a total of 60 acres fenced we have the ability to rotationally graze the sheep and cattle over a much more extensive area and we can move them along much faster than we were able to last spring, summer and fall. By picking up the pace of the rotational grazing we will protect our flock from

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the inevitable internal parasites by moving them before the parasites are in their infective stage and ingested by the sheep. The other big benefit is that the faster we move the animals along the more forage we will get from the pastures. It's counterintuitive but true. The goal is to let the sheep graze the pasture down to about 4" high then move them to the next paddock, which is a fairly small area. This way they eat the new growth that is full of protein and energy but they move on before they graze it so short as to damage the plants' root structure and get to the last few inches where the parasites are found.

In addition to being able to improve our grazing practices the dogs will, knock on wood, stay in the fence while the predators stay out. Last night I awoke to hear the coyotes directly behind the house howling away. I hoped the dogs were on the job and that the pigs were safe. I didn't worry so much about the sheep as the dogs are highly protective of them. The pigs are a different story – the dogs have not been allowed the contact that would enable them to bond with the pigs though Frankie, our alpha dog, always shows great interest in what they are doing. Last week I was taking her down the hill to put her back in with the sheep in the lower pasture. She started to follow me but then turned and ran back to watch the pigs. After repeating this several times she decided to come with me and get back to work.

Having the fencers here for two weeks was interesting as we often work alone or with one another and rarely interact with others on the farm. The fencing team consists of Rustin Wilson, the owner of Empire Fence Company, one of his young sons, and two young brothers who are neighbors of the Wilsons. There were two things that we knew about Rustin and his team before they arrived: they are Mennonites and they build some of the finest livestock fencing a farmer could ever hope for. The beautifully designed, well-built fence is a blessing to the farmer and is an off-shoot of the discipline these fellows bring to their work. The gates are in the right locations, special catch-pens are designed into the flow of the pastures and the fence line itself negotiates the terrain in a meaningful and artful way. In one area two gates swing open to create a temporary pen that serves as a passage from a pasture to the 100 year old orchard. Close the gates and the pen is gone. Simple and clever. An elegant design.

In addition to the high-level of skill these men possess, they were true gentlemen, working quickly and quietly out in the landscape. Each interaction we had with them was fascinating – they shared stories about their experiences fencing and farming as well as tidbits about their families. They were funny and playful, serious and sincere. It was a true joy to have this tight-knit group of men working on the farm. We were thankful to have made their acquaintance and are fortunate that they have committed to installing a watering system for us before the year's end. We look forward to seeing them again and learning more about them as they help us develop our farm.

