

Farm projects stress farmhand

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Spring stress is weighing on me.

Farm projects have hibernated over the winter. They emerged with a gleam in their eyes and an urgency to reproduce.

Holes in farm fences started carrying on about the first of March. Rotted stakes and disintegrated posts were appearing in litters of three by early April. I spent four half days fixing fences only to discover two new patches were needed six weeks later.

My first March project was replacing a power pole that carries the electric line to the chestnut barn. The sensible thing would have been to pay the telephone company to install one of their fancy preserved poles, which is what my sensible neighbors would have done.

The non-sensible thing was to cut a 36-foot-long locust in the woods in February, skid it over the snow to the road, contrive a way to get it to the barn two miles away, then set it upright, plumb and immobile in a six-foot deep hole with the help of a neighbor's backhoe. I've been like this for a long time.

The bane of each spring is multiflora rose, a thorny perennial shrub that grows aggressively in both sunny fields and shady woods.

It was imported from Japan in the 1860s as an ornamental. The U.S. Soil and Conservation Service hyped it in the 1930s for erosion control and as a self-propagating "living" fence. Free cuttings were distributed. Some states planted it in median strips to cut headlight blindness and as a soft crash barrier.

No one in authority figured out that birds eat its hips and spread the plant beyond eroded lands, living fences and medians. Each plant can produce an estimated one million seeds, which can survive in soil without germinating for as many as 20 years.

Left alone, multiflora rose drives out native vegetation and creates impenetrable thickets. I don't leave it alone.

I stride our pastures and woods each spring like the Lone Ranger, shooting Roundup at the bad guys with a houseplant spritzer in each hand. Our fields are mostly free of it, but I'm barely holding my own in the forest.

The departed muskrats left tunnels that have lowered the pond by 18 inches. I'm reluctant to plug these tunnels by swimming up to them in 50-degree water as a frogperson.

I need to drain the pond and fill in their handiwork. I think about this every time I look at the pond, which is at least five times a day.

Last fall, we made a huge brush pile in the front field from the limbs and branches of a 100-year-old silver maple that we had to take down. The maple, which shaded the kitchen, died over several years. The last surviving twig pointed an accusing finger at my cooking.

The pile will make an enormous blaze for about 15 minutes and then smolder for a day or two. My wife and neighbors quite reasonably hope I will not set their barns, homes and livestock afire.

This means I have to coordinate an absolutely windless late afternoon with wet ground while having the Blue Grass VFD on call, which is more complicated than it sounds.

The last time Melissa and I answered a fire call was the BGVFD's first run some 25 years ago. The veteran companies, which had extinguished the fire by the time we rolled to a stop in a donated 1944 Burma Jeep with a water tank that was about the size of a squirt gun, were speechless when Melissa strapped on her helmet and said she was ready despite being eight months pregnant.

Still, we had gotten there, such as we were at the time, and were accepted for what we were—responders. It took a couple of decades for the BGVFD to live this one down.

The big spring project is reinforcing a 100-foot-long block wall under the two-story turkey house that I've converted to hay, cattle and horses. After 65 years, water and ground pressure began to buckle this wall inward.

Left alone, it would eventually collapse, causing the collapse of the building, causing the collapse of my marriage and causing the proportional rise in our farmowner's insurance premium. My premium is high enough; I'm not leaving the wall alone.

The fix requires setting upright 11 nine-foot-tall creosoted pier poles about eight to 10 feet apart, each surrounded by a concrete base. Between this line of poles and the blocks, I'm stacking up a five-foot-high wall of two-inch-thick planks.

I've been wrestling around four pickup loads of planks, the 11 poles that weigh between 125 and 250 pounds each and about 8,000 pounds of concrete (one part cement, two parts sand, three parts #57 gravel and water) that I'm stirring in an ancient wheelbarrow. A Ph.D. in international relations is always useful when fooling with peers set in concrete.

The poles on their pedestals look like the Parthenon's Doric columns, sort of, in a manner of speaking. Like the Parthenon, my poles exhibit classical entasis, the gradual reduction in diameter from bottom to top. But I don't think the virgin goddess Athena pooped in her temple, which is what Melissa's three horses do in theirs.

And then there are -- and have been -- two small roof leaks. I keep forgetting to call both the roofer who hasn't come for nine months after saying he'd be right over and the one who will come if I remember to call him, which I haven't despite reminding myself to do this almost daily. I forgot to call him last night once again after writing this paragraph.

And then the resident source of new projects decided that the living-room floor needed to be refinished (which, I admit, it did), and the kitchen floor needed to be redone (which, I admit, it does)—both of which involve moving the furniture of both rooms out and back as well as painting the baseboards and trim (which, I admit, really need it bad). Lest you think I'm bragging, I will not describe the treasures I discovered under the kitchen stove when I freed it from 30 years of guard duty.

And then a large cherry tree blew down into Key Run behind the barns two weeks ago.

In the summer, cleaning this up is always a top priority, because wild cherry leaves contain prunasin, an enzyme that degrades into hydrogen cyanide when the leaves wilt from stress (as in, when the tree falls down dead). Farmers burn cherry leaves immediately when they fall out of season from drought, frost or wilting so that livestock don't eat them (which, I admit, they really love to do) and die from suffocation (which they seem to like to do almost as much).

The cherry fell into waterless Key Run before its leaves had appeared. Oh, lucky me, I thought. No cutting, piling and leaf burning.

Then last week the Run started running after three days of rain. The water broke off the tree's crown and pushed it toward a water gap—a flexible fence flap that crosses the Run.

If the branchy top were to become entangled with the water gap, I would be up a creek. But I have to sit tight, because I can't yank the top out of the stream bed until the water goes down.

The cherry top is now another worry-about project (along with the unstuffed muskrat tunnels) that needs to be done as soon as it can be done, which is not right now.

And then I have to put the new handles on the cattle head catch to make it usable again.

And then I have to disassemble the ruined grain auger that the itchy-headed horses have broken by their manic scratching.

And then I have to replace the cellar door whose pressure-treated preserved lumber has rotted out.

And the list goes on.

One reason that farm projects are getting out of control is me. I don't work as long or as hard as I did when I was 30. I now generate the growing backlog that shadows my steps. The slower I get, the more undone projects I drag along. This is getting worse, not better.

A second reason is that the time I have available to devote to farm projects is staying about the same—late afternoons and weekends. I work during the day. I'm using "work" in its broadest sense inasmuch as it covers things like pedaling a motionless bike for an hour and writing lies.

A third reason is that I hate certain kinds of projects, such as digging and fencing. I amaze myself at how many defensible reasons I can find to avoid doing what I don't like to do.

Unfortunately, unlikable projects don't fade away. They just become bigger and more unlikable.

Finally, farm projects grow because everything falls apart over time, including me.

The primary motivation for doing most farm projects is fear. If I don't do it now, the job will become harder, longer and costlier in the future. Other necessary tasks in life don't generate the same angst, though more would get done if they did.

It used to be that farmers had a "hired man" or two -- farmhands -- to do things on the farm. The last farmhand I recall around Blue Grass left about 15 years ago when his employer died. Recent college grads with \$100,000 in student-loan debt would learn a lot by picking rocks out of a pasture for \$10 an hour for a year or two.

Farm stress is not the migraine variety that comes from high-powered, big-city work. It's more a nagging discomfort that underpins the realization that you can never get even with the things that need to be done.

It's 5 p.m., and I promised myself that I would hit another lick on the Parthenon before Athena gets ticked off.

Mixing concrete is a cheap and effective way to relieve stress, as is picking rocks. I'm willing to show you how, if you want to find your inner peace.

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