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Maintenance never ends ⊥ never should

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Saturday morning before things start is a good time to begin most anything. Like a first draft of this column. I was in front of the screen by 6, emitting coffee exhausts. Nothing. I played FreeCell. Still nothing. More FreeCell. More nothing.

To goose the creative process, I checked my email several dozen times in hope that someone other than the crooked Nigerian with a \$17-million-dollar proposal might have contacted me. All I had was a Dane with \$10 million and two ideas for enlargements, neither of which involved my brain.

I had planned to drive to the gym to lift weights at 7:30 after getting some words down on pixels.

Adding muscle at 62 is as useful as patting sand onto a beach castle just before the surf comes in. Still, sand castles disappear faster without such maintenance. Right?

And then I remembered that Saturday was my day to repair farm fences in advance of the cattle -- party of 60 -- arriving in a week.

Spring fence work involves tacking things up that want nothing more than to lie down on the greening earth and rust in peace. With a few new steel staples, old wire is expected to present a united front for another couple of years, postponing the expense and drudgery of replacing it.

Everyone hates building new fence, because, among other reasons, we know that it too becomes old. This discouraging truth applies to other aspects of life as well.

Fence repair hurts your back and shreds your hands. Nothing is more disagreeable

save, perhaps, getting a call at 11 on a stormy Sunday night: “Your cattle are in the road; I thought you’d want to know.”

This is the only reason why country landowners do maintenance: The alternative is always worse.

Faced with hours of near-fatal fence misery, I gave up lifting anything as heavy as a fresh idea out of my mental tar pit where all of my oversized thoughts disappeared long ago. Then I bagged exercise.

“TO THE FENCES,” I muttered with the same peasant enthusiasm that Stalin’s subjects used when they were marched to their dirt, singing, “TO OUR NEWLY COLLECTIVIZED FIELDS. HURRAH! HURRAH!”

Six hours later -- scratched, bleeding and aching from more joints than I have -- I had patched half the fence line, my moral fiber had been reinforced with a strand of new barbed wire and I had a column idea: The Rules of Country Maintenance.

Accept reality: Everything falls apart. Once you understand that time crumbles our stoutest buildings and our best efforts, you’ve written yourself a ticket to maintenance sanity.

Look. The Appalachian Mountains started out as high as the Himalayas, so what chance does your barn repair have of lasting even up to the next Ice Age? None. Country dwellers need to keep their repair expectations in geologic perspective.

The standard by which to measure yourself is simple: Do it so that you don’t have to do it again any time soon. If you can remember the year when you last made a repair, you didn’t do it good enough.

As long as you understand that every repair eventually requires succeeding repairs (which are harder than those coming before), you will undertake all maintenance tasks with the depressing fatalism they deserve.

A rule of thumb is to build everything to a standard that when it needs to be done again, you will be gone.

Don’t procrastinate. A repair deferred is a risk expanded. Time makes every country problem worse. Of course, stalling should not be eliminated willy-nilly from your problem-solving options.

I keep procrastination on hold, but ready to go.

Shift blame. This is an art not a science. Farmers always have the weather. Other culprits that bear responsibility for fence holes and other breakdowns include neighbors, crossed stars, the Clinton Administration, big banks, little banks, all banks, Cheney, gremlins and spouses. Matching the breakdown to the responsible party is where art replaces science.

Maintenance is more agreeable if you can persuade yourself that you are blameless.

Vegetation rules. In the country, plants win sooner or later, particularly weeds. They give you practice at being a good loser.

In my woods, rival gangs -- The Striped Maples and the Pokeweeds -- fight over turf. They steal from upright citizens in broad daylight.

Thistles thrive in my pasture like the Sopranos in Jersey. Teasels seem to be immune from prosecution. Multiflora rose is a perp with many priors. They have organized themselves into Families and kill each other only when necessary.

I whack them, and they reappear. Many of these invasive criminals have roots that go back to foreign countries, about which Lou Dobbs has said not word one.

It's best, I think, to declare victory and not make them too angry.

No one always escapes dirty jobs. The best approach to doing dirty jobs is to deny yourself time to think about them.

Fight water as little as possible. Everything having to do with running water -- pipes, pumps, tanks, wells, ponds, stream banks -- eventually breaks.

The more you try to make water do things against its will, the more leaks you spring. While you want water to shut up and run passively from the ground to your second-story bathroom sink, water prefers to run down, not up. Water always wins these tests of strength.

Keep all water systems as simple as possible. Gravity works by the way, and it's usually more reliable in the long run than pumps.

Always investigate water weirdness. Some years ago, my wife said something about a funny smell in our tap water. I couldn't smell a skunk in my kitchen if it sprayed my nose, but the water tasted more-or-less okay to me. Another princess-and-the-pea complaint, I thought. I checked our spring, but found nothing. Melissa continued to nag and whine.

To humor her, I called a plumber. He found a blockage in an elbow between the holding tank and the pump, caused by a large and very dead salamander.

I now pay close attention to what my then four-year-old daughter called, "Momma's taste bugs."

Two good things can be said about country maintenance chores. First, it's better to do them than not. Second, you may find a half-decent idea while doing them that gives you an excuse not to do any more of them that day.

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