

#77 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 12, 2009

Outbuildings are always good for something
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Outbuildings are to country property as legs are to a centipede. Each functions better when all are in working order and you have some to spare.

Urban buyers usually focus on a property's house, because that is what they know. Nothing wrong with that. Equal attention, however, should be paid to the supporting cast of improvements, without which the show may go on but not very well. Working farms, in particular, rely on a few star structures and many role players.

If I were a real-estate broker working with country properties, I would always include a discussion of the utility and value of outbuildings with both sellers and buyers.

Barns are the upper crust of outbuilding society.

State-of-the-art barns are high-tech, factory-type environments built for a specific production function like dairying or poultry. They may or may not be readily adaptable to other purposes.

New barns on working farms tend to be functional—long on quick-construction techniques and short on Old-MacDonald charm. They use dollars efficiently in getting a lot of square feet under roof.

If you want to use existing barn space for something else, there's usually a market for second-hand equipment. The advantage of reconfiguring existing structures is that you generally start with a lot of dry floor space, big doors, electricity and water. A concrete floor is a bonus.

Older production systems, milking for instance, need to be evaluated carefully for age, capacity, energy efficiency, productivity and condition. Part-time farmers don't need cutting-edge systems and equipment, though IRS regs encourage such business expenditures.

Old barns are the lollipops of nostalgia. Timber-framed and wood-sided, they creak, they're warm and they smell good. An old-timer in good condition is an aesthetic blessing, though it may be impractical for modern needs. In the worst case, a wreck of an old barn may have significant salvage-and-recycle value.

A barn was the central, life-sustaining structure of the old-fashioned farm. It

was more important to a farm family than their residence. Most were built with care and craft. The ones that weren't are today's falling-in wrecks.

Approach old barns whose condition is between good and bad with great caution. Don't let their charm pick your pocket. Some old-barn repairs are cheap and easy, and others are hard, dangerous and hideously expensive. Foundations and roofs can be wallet gobblers. Old barns may be eligible for state and federal preservation tax credits.

Information is available at www.uvm.edu/~vhnet/hpres/publ/barnb/bbtit.html and www.preservehistory.org/restoring_or_reusing_old_barns.htm.

Old barns provide a lot of vertical volume, which old-barn farmers needed for storing and feeding hay by hand. These structures provide limited, inefficient storage for machine-stacked round bales and seasonal equipment. On the other hand, they're great for swings and sneezing.

When enthusiastic city visitors came for a visit during haying season years ago, sly hosts acknowledged their superior executive talents by starting them right at the top of the organization...up in the mow stacking bales under a metal roof on a 95-degree afternoon. Farm life today offers fewer opportunities for cross-cultural education.

Horse barns are fish in a different kettle. I've seen horses stabled in structures ranging from lean-tos, which leaned too much, to palaces where someone like me should have removed his shoes before entering. Some horses are housed better than the Obamas, which, I think, is an argument for spending less on the former not more on the latter..

Older farms have many outbuildings that were built for a single function, such as smoking meat, cooping chickens, storing grain, cooling food and providing workspaces. Whenever these structures are described as "dependencies," the asking price is set at least 10 percent higher. Slave quarters boost asking prices by 25 percent for reasons I've yet to understand.

Old sheds are distant cousins to old barns, though some argue against direct kinship.

A shed might be well-constructed, but many were tossed up hurriedly with second-rate or second-hand materials.

Three-sided sheds often become mental institutions for vehicles that no longer run, boats that no longer float and basketballs that have lost their bounce. They may also house workout equipment that is no longer working out.

Every outbuilding starts out empty. It's sinful to leave them barren.

A dry outbuilding begs to be useful, if only to store worthless stuff that you have no plan to collect and will probably never need. I have one such room filled with indispensable paper—tax records going back to the deductible “Twists” of Chubby Checker, college “blue books” written in undecipherable cursive that will be an archeological treasure 2,000 years from now because no one will be able to read them and correspondence with friends who no longer like me. I do not intend to “clean out” this asset in my estate, either prior to or after my demise.

Supplies also go into outbuildings. Supplies come in two kinds: consumables and possibles. Consumables are used right away. Possibles are items that you are no longer using and may never use again. Nonetheless, you know you will need them if you don’t have them.

I maintain our outbuildings on an “as needed” basis, which means that I’m not as needed fixing them up as I am reading, writing or sleeping.

My “as-needed” approach is a green alternative to constant scraping and painting. I favor carbon-neutral strategies for outbuilding upkeep, which, in my case, only generate windbag gasses.

Shops are a type of outbuilding in which we repair what we have broken as well as things that are not broken. Every country place needs at least one shop, preferably with a concrete floor, overhead hoist, woodstove and fire extinguisher. Many men, as they age, retreat into their shops. Some, like Jimmy Carter, emerge better for their repairs.

Outbuildings are an asset when they’re useable, and a liability when they’re not. The best have learned to take care of themselves.

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