

Northern Path Family Farm

Spring Newsletter - 2015



Spring greetings to you and yours! Although the calendar tells us that we're officially into spring, by the feel of the icy cold temperatures these past few mornings it seems that old man winter is still stubbornly wearing out his welcome before saying goodbye until next season. The routine of going out before dawn, donned in a couple layers of long johns, insulated gloves, and my trusty Stormy Kromer, just to break up the frozen drinking water for the chickens and the goats, has become so old hat at this point. It is Easter Sunday 2015 as I type this, and a quick glance at the 10-day forecast on the smart phone shows morning temps from here on out staying above the 32 degree mark! Finally! Then again it is April, and anything can happen.

This winter came with a lot of the typical challenges that we would expect through the course of a long spell of arctic temperatures, but along with the usual stuff came a host of unexpected surprises that certainly tested our resolve and patience. Just after the start of the first cold snap to hit us in early January, I awoke to find the dreaded, kick-in-the-gut feeling of seeing no water flowing upon opening the kitchen faucet. It hadn't been that cold yet to really freeze the pipes, so I put on the headlamp and headed outside to the well house to inspect. Your typical well house will contain the important mechanicals which serve to supply water to the home, including a pressure tank, well pump, electrical pressure switch, and galvanized pipes. All of these items are important, but most importantly NONE of these items should be underwater! Upon opening up the door to the well house and switching on the headlamp to inspect, that kick-in-the-gut feeling was substantiated by the shock of seeing over 4-feet of standing water which, due to a corroded and broken pipe, continued to gush as I stood there watching. After two days time and three trips to the Home Depot, all was fixed and back to normal. But I've learned not to hold my breath for too long. The next thing to go south was our hot water tank. That's right...first it was the *water* that broke...next it was the *hot water*! That was another weekend repair that I hope to not have to undertake again for a long time.

With winter hopefully behind us now, we look forward to getting outdoors again and begin some of the many new and exciting projects that we have planned for the farm this year. We wish you all a happy spring and we hope to see you all on the farm again very soon!

Pastured Chicken

For 2015 our pastured chicken pricing is **\$4.50/lb**, which remains the same as last season. To remind our customers, we use only certified organic grains as a complement to the natural pasture our birds obtain for their diet. Dressed birds generally weigh on average between 3.5-5 lbs. Please follow the below instructions on how to order:

- 1) **Email us at:**
northernpathfamilyfarm@gmail.com
and let us know how many birds you will commit to purchase.
- 2) **Come out to the farm on the announced on-farm pick-up date to pay for and take home your fully-dressed birds.**

Fall Turkeys

For 2015 our pastured turkey pricing is **\$4.75/lb**. Our fully-dressed turkeys can weigh anywhere from 14lbs (hens) up to 25lbs (toms). Ordering instructions are the same as above, simply send us an email to confirm your commitment to purchase and what quantity. We encourage you to place your order early as the number of birds is limited.



We are off to a great start this spring and we're very excited to announce the first customer pick-up date for our very first batch of broiler chickens for 2015! If you are interested in purchasing any chickens from this first batch please follow the order instructions to the left.

1st Batch - Sunday June 28th

Our first run will consist of 50 birds which will arrive as one-day old chicks on our farm on April 23rd. We brood these chicks in a protected and heated brooder for 3 weeks, after which they are transferred out on pasture for the next 7 weeks. There they will enjoy a daily diet of fresh greens mixed in with a little protein from the variety of insects made available to them in a pasture that's completely free of insecticides, fungicides, herbicides, pesticides, biocides, or any other 'cides' that you can think of. . Our on-farm pick-up day for this first batch of chickens will take place on **Sunday June 28th from 11am-5pm.**

Shiitake Mushroom Cultivation

There's a fungus among us! And the culprit is the delectable shiitake mushroom. Here's a totally new project that we've just begun here on the farm, but it's one that we won't see a yield from for quite some time. We've put together the materials that will allow us to cultivate shiitake mushrooms!



to drill a series of 3/8" holes 1 1/4" deep. The spacing between each hole along a single row is approximately 6", and the spacing between each row is 2". It's best to alternate the location of the holes between the rows so as to create an 'X' pattern.



Dowel plugs infused with shiitake mycelium

The process begins by preparing the logs. White oak is said to be the one of the best species of wood to use. You need to use living trees, no deadstand or rotting wood, and you will cut during the tree's dormant period. We cut our logs in early February when all of the sap is still stored in the root system and has not yet begun to flow into the main body of the tree. The ideal dimensions are 40" in length by 3-6" in diameter. The next step is to prepare the log to receive the plug spawn by drilling a series of holes along the length of the log. A general pattern to follow is

In the end you will end up with around 50 holes drilled per log, and trust me this is an arduous task that will test your stamina! We used a total of 20 logs for our project, so easy math will tell you that we drilled 1,000 holes. And 1,000 was indeed the magic number that we needed to accomplish for this project because that is how many spawn plugs came with our order. We ordered our spawn from Field & Forest out of Wisconsin (www.fieldforest.net). The spawn plug is just a wooden dowel plug that has been



Drilling holes in white oak

Done 10000 10000 10000

pre-inoculated with the specific strain of shiitake mushroom that you order. There are various strains within the shiitake genus that are available, but you'll want to select a strain that matches up to your climate conditions. We selected the WR46 strain which is suitable for our cold Michigan winters. If shiitake is not your thing, you can also do similar cultivation techniques using oyster, maitake, wine cap, reishi, among many others which are available in a variety of spawn media.



Bag of 1,000 spawn plugs! Happy drilling!!

After inserting all of the spawn plugs into the pre-drilled holes, the next step is to seal the top of the hole to prevent any outside fungus from entering the log and competing with your shiitake spawn. We use melted cheese wax, which is basically a food-grade paraffin wax that is used to seal the top of the inoculation hole. When we have the 'assembly line' groove going with drilling and inserting dowel plugs, we keep a hot plate with a small pot of cheesewax on low just enough to keep it in liquid form. We then use a foam dauber to



Inoculating white oak with shiitake plug spawn

apply the melted wax on the surface of the hole. Those foam paint brushes that you can find at the dollar store are a great tool for this task. After all the holes are sealed up, your logs are now ready to enter the phase called the 'spawn run', and this is where the waiting comes for those of us who are eager to try a fresh shiitake! The spawn run is the duration of time required for the mycelium to fully inoculate the log. The mycelium is the network of fungus strands that will slowly grow and branch out through the log and eventually, given the right conditions, begin to push up the fruiting bodies we know as mushrooms. We've got quite a while to wait before we get to enjoy any of the yields, and we will be sure to keep you posted in future newsletters on the progress of the logs and when we see our first one! The next time you're out on the farm be sure to ask to see our finished mushroom logs and where we store them. Also be sure to check out the field and forest website for some great information on mushroom cultivation.



Aidan's Corner

Hi everybody. I hope you made it through the winter. We are so happy it is finally spring. We did something really cool in this spring that I wanted to talk about. We tapped our trees in order to make syrup. It was a lot of fun. First we made homemade spiles. A spile is the thing that let's the sap flow from the tree. Sometimes they are made out of metal but we wanted to try a different way. We used an old native American way to make these. We took a branch from the sumac tree, and then we were able to make it hollow and make the shape so it was good for collecting sap. Then we collected a lot of sap over a couple of days. In just a couple days we were able to get 10 gallons of sap! Then the next step is to boil the sap to get rid of all the water. It takes a long time because you have to get rid of the water through steam. But what is left over is the sugar and that is what the syrup is. It is an easy process but it just takes a lot of hours to boil it down. Anyway, the taste is soooo good. It is the best syrup we ever tried. And we are happy that we are able to make it ourselves. Ok, until next time. See ya! Oh yeah, I have a lot of eggs so please let me know if you need any. Thanks.



Home-made Sumac Spile...and fresh sap!



The Finished Product!

What's New for 2015



Here in the early days of spring we're working hard to get things in order to prepare for a number of new projects that we'll be undertaking here on the farm in 2015. Last year of course the primary focus was to get our pastured poultry operation up and running, which took a considerable amount of time and resources to establish all of the necessary infrastructure (i.e., brooder, portable pens, feeders, electronet fencing, processing equipment, etc) to make it a success. With everything now in place, that segment of the farm operations should almost run itself this year, which will now free up some time to allow us to move on to some of the subsequent phases of our long-term development of the farm. Below is a quick summary of some of the new projects that you will see us working on the next time you're out to visit. Our goal is to get all of these started, with the hope of completing most if not all of the projects before year's end. Lofty goals we know, but we will aim high and see where we end up. And of course, there's always next year!

- **Fruit/Nut Orchard** – In just a few weeks we will be undertaking a 'mass planting' of fruit and nut trees to establish a long-term food forest on the eastern block of the property. We'll begin with over 120 trees which will include well known varieties such as apple, peach, plum, and pear, but some of the more interesting trees in the mix will be American persimmon, Michigan pecan, chestnut, hazelnut (American & precocious varieties), pawpaw, cranberry, and some others. In just a few short years these trees should yield hundreds of pounds of edible goodies!
- **Tree Nursery** - We've already begun initial establishment of some of our propagation growing beds which will be used for growing nursery stock from seeds. We have hundreds of seeds collected last season which include white & bur oak, shagbark & pignut hickory, sugar maple, and black locust. All seeds were cold-stratified during the winter and are now ready to be planted and reared for the next couple of seasons in the growing beds until they are ready to be transplanted as bare-root stock elsewhere on the farm. Our yields from the nursery will eventually be offered for sale to the public.

- **Mushroom Cultivation** – As described in the pages above, we've begun a fun project to cultivate shiitake mushrooms using white oak logs as a growing medium. Like most activities on the farm it is hard work to get the logs established, but once they're done it's basically a 'set it and forget it' operation that will provide abundant yields of delectable shiitake mushrooms for years to come. To date we've surveyed a number of health food markets and upscale restaurants to gauge interest and it is clear that there is significant demand for high quality shiitake mushrooms grown locally. At \$12-16/lb., long term I expect this segment of the farm to be one of our most lucrative.
- **Annual Garden** – We've just about completed our 'critter fence' which should serve to mitigate entry into our kitchen garden from the likes of deer and rabbits. Those two animals alone can wreak havoc on a young vegetable garden in just one night! Last season didn't afford us the time to get our garden going at the scale we had hoped, but this year we'll aim to get more seed in the ground now that we'll have the garden fence established. The objective here is to grow a variety of annual vegetables that we can harvest a few feet from the back door and enjoy all season long.
- **HugelKultur Berms** – We had many visitors last season curiously ask us what those interesting looking mounds were that we were building in strategic locations around the landscape. They're called HugelKultur berms, which is German for 'woody bed'. We built 3 distinct mounds last season and the stretch goal will be to establish at least 2 more before seasons end. Look out for a more detailed write-up in our summer newsletter, but to describe it simply the objective is to bury rotting, punky wood which is infused with fungal mycelium, on top of which you cover with soil and then plant annual or perennial seeds, depending on your plans for that particular location. You cover with a layer of compost, and then allow the bed to grow! But there is some magic here that we'll describe next time which almost guarantees a very fruitful yield from the growing bed.

As you can see we'll have our work cut out for us this season. These are really just a handful of what we hope to accomplish, or at least get started. We didn't even touch on our wood yard! We've already cut and split 2 cords of wood to prepare for *next* winter! Here on the farm you learn very quickly that the seasons sneak up on you and it's in your best interest to try and stay ahead of them as best you can!

Be Sure To Visit Us At:
www.northernpathfamilyfarm.com

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*Thank you for supporting
your local farm!*

Jason, Patty, & Aidan Brake

