



Farm News - March

A number of sows on First Nature Farms have come down with a fever - spring fever! Why? There's a new boar on the farm! "Willy" the Berkshire boar is a couple of months past puberty and is ready to socialize. Unfortunately for Willy, he is a 'city' boar among a group of country sows. Not that Willy actually comes from the city but in my mind, city pigs are the ones that grow up in those crowded barns, see only artificial light, and breathe polluted air. They just don't have the general "know how" it takes to live in the country. Fortunately for Willy, he had the genetics we needed and that was his winning ticket out.

Being a city boar there were a few things that took Willy some getting used to. His diet for example. He was used to pellets, not fresh ground whole grains. His drinking habits never got past the nipple, first from his mom then from a metal pipe. It took a few days to learn how to drink from a bowl. When he tried he would just blow bubbles. Confidence was a problem, being afraid to leave his hut. Maybe it was the big sky or scary humans. One touch would send him racing back inside.

Then the time came for the electric fence. He was used to metal bars. The electric fence would be the key to his future of free ranging. He would have lots of area to explore if he could stay within the wire. It took a couple of weeks of getting used to eating, drinking and human contact before I expanded his area and in one corner, put up an electric wire. A few minutes later I heard a "yelp". Then another. The next day I expanded his area again (about 5000 square feet, a lot for a city boar). He respected the perimeter which meant he was now free to do some socializing. But there was one more thing about Willy, he spoke a different language. It made sense that after many generations of separation and with different communication needs, the dialect or pronunciation of "pig words" would be different. Not that I speak fluent "pig" but I could tell his grunts were more choppy with less variety in range. Maybe his foreign accent will add to the "Ooo la la!" of springtime on the farm.

Spring training for the calves. The term "Come Boss!" is a classic call for getting the cows to come. Because they usually have a leader or boss cow, if the boss cow comes then the rest should follow. But why would they want to stop what they are doing and follow a human? Treats of course. In a cow's case - oats. They go nuts over oats. Even the bison do. The first couple of days there was no reaction. I'd walk into their pasture calling "Come Boss!" and they would just stare. Later in the morning I could see them at the trough, licking the oats. As the days progressed, they started taking quite an interest in me. While they were eating the oats I would call "Come Boss!" so their minds would associate the call with the good taste. After a few more days they were lined up at the trough. Now I walk in with a pail and get them to follow me as I drop little treats of oats in the snow. The eventual goal is to have them out on the grazing lease, 2000 acres and have them come when they're called.

Smart cows? Those Galloways have it figured. Their trough is 16 feet long and the little bit of oats they get is just a dusting. I raise grass fed, not grain fed beef. By standing in one spot the cow can just lick up a taste of oats each time. One of the Galloways has learned that if she walks along with her tongue out wiping the trough, she can scoop up a whole pile of oats.

March has been a quiet month. Usually the dinner table is full with people from around the world who come here to learn about organic farming. Not this month. I have had the whole farm to myself and although the work load is heavy, I like it. Spending the days with the warm spring sun (and occasional blizzard) taking care of the animals, I realize again that they enjoy a good life, just like me.

Jerry