

The Importance of Hay

Thursday, June 12, 2008

A garden needs farm, so last week I shifted focus a bit and cut hay. We make hay while the sun shines, but it gets rained on sometimes. It's an important crop for a variety of reasons.

Our land used to be forest, and supported wildlife and native Americans. After the invasion, much of the forest was cleared to grow crops. Serious soil erosion followed. Our weather and soils are different than Europe, and hard rains washed the soil into the rivers. Forest soils erode quickly when planted in corn.

Great conservation measures were enacted during the 1930's, and farmers were encouraged to plant hilly land in fescue. Fescue isn't a high protein feed by any means, but it held the soil. Eventually, it build soil. When it is cut, some of the roots die back and form humus.

Clover is the companion plant for grass. Its deep tap root occupies a different layer of soil than the shallow, thatch-forming fescue. As a legume, clover can add nitrogen to the soil. We help it by never spreading nitrogen fertilizer on the hay, as this kills the nitrogen-fixing bacteria which live on the legume roots, resulting in soil compaction, the yellow flowered buttercup weed, and the need to add more nitrogen every year.

Hay becomes feed for cattle, who also help build soil. A farm with an appropriate amount of livestock increases its fertility through proper management. This excess fertility creates the possibility for gardens. Hay and manure make excellent compost.

Round and round the fields we go. Turkey nests and baby fawns remind us of the way native Americans "farmed". They simply ringed unproductive forest trees, leaving oak, chestnut, beech, and other trees that made food for their "livestock". Indians didn't need fences, either.

After a few days, and a few thunder showers, its back on the tractor to rake. Round and round we go again. You'd think we'd get dizzy. Sun and wind offer their assistance, and the hay cures out. Soon big rolls dot the green fields.

The shaggy looking farm now looks manicured. By cutting hay and feeding cattle, we insure good gardens. This is why people like to mow lawns. The fresh cut grass reminds us instinctually that soils are being well taken care of and food production is possible.

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I am back on the tractor one more time to get the rolls out of the field and stored away until winter. The nearby grazing cattle seem unconcerned. They are busy eating, and don't seem worried about food for next winter. A tail goes up and the magic fertilizer is spread.

The gardens survived a few days of my negligence. The weeds look happy, but they won't be for long. Once we take care of them, our crops will take over and enjoy the cow-powered soil all to themselves.

Some old hay will find its way on directly as a mulch. The rest will have to wait to be digested, spend 18 days in the magic cow tummy, and then be composted for a year before it gets to the garden to help grow our food.