

Knowing your own land is a process that takes time and attention, and it is becoming more and more remote for the factory farmer who sits in an air-conditioned tractor cab with recorded music drowning out birdsong, the rustle of the wind in the trees and grasses, and other sounds of Nature. But, with industrial agriculture's huge fields which have removed fence rows and trees to provide more space for growing corn and soybeans, there is probably precious little birdsong or trees to whisper in the wind anyway.

I think about our land a lot. I imagine my great-grandmother walking barefooted through these same meadows before they were fields or pastures. I think about my great-grandfather breaking ground for the first crops to feed his cow and his horse as well as his family. I picture that cow and horse, hitched together with the cow having the long end of the evener so she didn't have to pull as hard. I suspect that Mother Nature would have been better served if no land had ever been cleared. Our area is natural woodland, and it wants to return to that state, as is evidenced when any piece of ground is left without pasturing livestock or working fields for several years.

But, a farm is what they made of this acreage they homesteaded, and a farm it remains. However, it is not a typical twenty-first century American farm. There are fence rows here, there are a lot of trees, there are birds singing, and when the wind blows, the trees provide another sort of music.

I have a little unscientific project underway on this piece of ground, or, at least, on part of it. We move our sheep almost daily during most of the summer, giving them a small area of pasture to eat in one day. Electrified portable fence netting makes this possible without a full time herder. We feel that our sheep are very healthy partly due to a varied diet. My "research" involves trying to determine just how diverse the plant life is on these pasture plots, and to look after the sheep have eaten in order to see if there are plants they have not touched.

Someone once said that weeds are the plants that are growing where we did not plant them. That seems a pretty good definition, since we notice that the sheep are particularly fond of several species that most

farmers do not welcome. The ewes and lambs do not seem to consider "weeds" all that bad. We have stood and watched as sheep rapidly changed a spring landscape from yellow to green as they nipped the flowers from dandelions. And they will stretch their necks to reach the blooms of Queen Anne's Lace later in the summer.

So, I have been walking back and forth through the paddocks before the sheep pasture there. What I see is definitely not monoculture. And, instead of the smell of chemical farming--very detectable to those of us who don't use pesticides, herbicides, or artificial fertilizer--my feet stir up the ever present summer odors of clover, alfalfa, and the herbs and forbs that are mixed with the grasses and legumes.

Just to give an example of what we find in our pastures, here is what I saw in plot #3 of the East Field area of the farm. And, I probably did not see more than half of the plants that were growing there. I don't walk over every foot of the paddock, just make several passes through it. And, there are plants I unfortunately don't recognize and some that are small enough that I simply don't notice them. But, I did see----brome grass, blue-eyed grass, a wetland grass I can't name, heal-all, red clover, lesser stitchwort, quack grass, timothy, yarrow, English plantain, orchard grass, goldenrod, dandelion, buttercup, trefoil, ox-eyed daisy, bull thistle, hop clover, two types of cinquefoil, alfalfa, sorrel, bindweed, curly dock, canary grass, wild carrot, white clover, alsike clover, yellow rocket, and orange hawkweed.

The sheep were on this parcel for one day. When they moved to the next piece, I walked through the paddock again. There were no patches of "weeds" uneaten. The ewes were satisfied and fit, and the lambs were growing well.

And the paddock itself? It had received the manure and urine from the sheep, had benefited from the "animal impact" of hundreds of sharp hooves aerating the soil, and had plenty of trampled down residue to go back into the ground. Livestock need the "salad bar" of diverse pasture, and the ground needs the effects livestock bring. And we benefit directly, too, as we enjoy the sight and sound of meadowlarks and bobolinks, the aroma of clover, and the beauty of the verdant, flowering

meadows.