

At the beginning of the year just after the holidays, we can see several jobs that will need completing before spring. Accomplishing them seems rather “doable,” with the tasks lined up in our minds in a horizontal list. But then, life interferes, and for one reason or another, mid February arrives with much of that same list still undone. Except now, instead of neatly arranged side by side roughly in an order of descending importance, it feels more like all of the jobs we need to do before spring are pouring into a funnel, slamming into each other, crowding and shoving, pouring out the spout as we frantically try to keep up.

Some of the turmoil of late winter/early spring surely casts doubt on our organizational skills, but much of it is just due to the fact that certain things have to be done at specific times, and they pile up in late February, March, and April.

We took a step toward spring this past week when we sheared our yearling ewes. They are not bred, but we want enough wool on them to protect them if we have to turn them out early to make room in the sheep shed for lambs.

As most people who know us are aware, we shear our sheep by hand, using the traditional blades that “snick, snick” through the fleece quietly, a calming influence on both the sheep and us. I didn’t learn to shear sheep until about fifteen years ago. Runo had shorn our flock by machine for many years until he had an opportunity to take part in a workshop given by blade shearing master, Kevin Ford. Since then, our shearing rig has never been plugged in. I was always leery of the machine, but once Runo began using hand blades, I wanted to learn, too. And, learn I did, one step at a time.

I am not a wonderful sheep shearer. I am slower than Runo and don’t do nearly as neat a job. But, I do manage to get the wool off, and I like the process very much. No one can deny that it is hard work. But, it is also satisfying labor, and when we look at the ewe lamb flock in the shed, all newly white and shorn, we feel that we have done our best.

So, that task is done. Now, though, we have to get the hay barn ready for bringing in the ewe flock from the fields where they spend the winter. If we are plagued by mild, wet weather, that time comes sooner, but we hope to wait until March first.

This is when the crunch comes. In order to have room inside for the pens sheltering the 130 ewes, we need to have a certain amount of hay used up in the hay barn—the building that doubles as a lambing shed. Often, this means that Runo has to move many of the 4X4 round bales from the barn to temporary storage outside, some on hay wagons, some on the ground. We prefer to store our bales inside to save feed, but usually, some of them have to spend a month or two outside the building in March and April.

So, first, the hay bales must be moved. Then, the material that is laid on the dirt floor of the hay barn to raise the hay from the ground

must be removed. Then, the long feeders that serve as both mangers and pen dividers must be brought in. A couple of years ago, in a heavy snow winter, we spent hours digging them out of drifts that were over our fences.

Once the feeders are in and pens set up, we can bring in the ewes. And, when they are divided into groups of a dozen or so, we can begin shearing. If all goes well, we finish before lambs start to arrive.

At the same time that we need to do these jobs, we have our usual chores dealing with cattle, snow removal, and the myriad of tasks in the house. So, we do often edge toward panic this time of year. But then, we think—we have those ewe lambs shorn, now we just have to go on to the next thing, and before we know it, lambing season will be nearly over, and we will see an orderly list of spring tasks to do. And then, that list will turn on its head, pour down that same funnel, and comes streaming out, a jumble of gardening, fence repair, moving livestock, and—this spring—training border collie pups.

You know—we think it is a pretty good way to live our lives.

