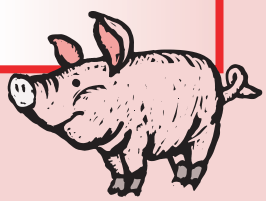
Fox Chase Farm

A bucolic respite in the BIG CITY

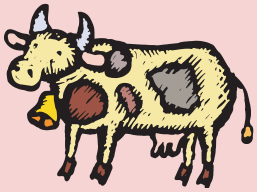
by: **Debbie Carr,** *Director*
Environmental Education
Fairmount Park Commission

Each year the farm attracts thousands of families and school children who come to see the farm's Hereford and Angus cattle, sheep, chickens, pigs, goats, and horses.

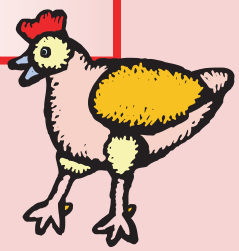


From what the tourist industry tells us, people love farms. They love the long vistas of open fields, the memory of simpler times, and the sight of cows and sheep grazing lazily on a quiet summer day. In the city of Philadelphia, where 1.5 million people enjoy trendy restaurants and maneuver around high-rise office buildings, shopping districts, and busy neighborhoods, this is no exception. But, surprisingly, Philadelphians don't have far to travel to enjoy these bucolic sights. In fact, they don't even need to leave the city. Situated in Fairmount Park in the northeast section of Philadelphia is Fox Chase Farm, a 112-acre education and demonstration farm with gentle sloping agricultural fields and farm buildings.

Each year the farm attracts thousands of families and school children who come to see the farm's Hereford and Angus cattle, sheep, chickens, pigs, goats, and horses. Fox Chase Farm straddles the boundary of Philadelphia and Montgomery counties and is bordered on the north by Lorimer Park, to the east by Pennypack Creek, to the south by Pennypack Park, and to the west by privately owned land. The sloping tract has been farmed since the settlement of William Penn and maintains the feel of a 19th century farm. There are eleven farm buildings at various elevations in the topography, some hidden among pine trees or tucked behind white split rail fences. The buildings include a stone Pennsylvania bank barn from 1800, a hay barn and pig house from 1940, and a manor house from 1822, used now as an office for the farm's teaching staff. The newest building on the farm complex, built in 2001, is a board and batten siding educational center with a band of windows



The farm festivals and public programs are volunteer magnets, where volunteers make biscuits, assist with hayrides, teach wood carving, paint pumpkins with the children, and, while tapping to the guitar and fiddles of country and Irish music, develop new friendships.



offering a breathtaking view of the fields.

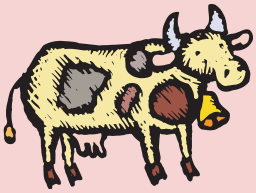
The resident farmer, Daryl Wampler, and his family live in the tenant farmer's house, a white two-story farmhouse built in 1849. Like farmers in many of the more rural areas of Pennsylvania, Wampler wakes up before dawn to the boisterous crowing of the rooster and begins his day hauling feed for the farm's animals.

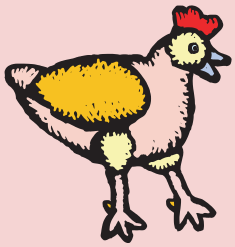
Through a cooperative partnership, the Fairmount Park Commission leases the farm to the School District of Philadelphia. The school district maintains the day-to-day operations of the farm, hires the resident farmer, and conducts weekday agricultural programs for schools. Fairmount Park coordinates the public outreach programs and special events, such as Applefest, Sheep Shearing, and Maple Sugar Day. Applefest is the largest, drawing as many as 3,000 visitors, and is always held on the third Saturday in October. Families come to pick out their pumpkins and gourds from the farm's garden patch (maintained by volunteers from the Friends of Fox Chase Farm), take hayrides on the wooden hay wagon, press apples for cider, or try their prowess at the "apple assault," a giant sling shot tied between two tall tree stumps that uses apples to hit targets in the field.

The farm festivals and public programs are volunteer magnets, where volunteers make biscuits, assist with hayrides, teach wood carving, paint pumpkins with the children, and, while tapping to the guitar and fiddles of country and Irish music, develop new friendships. The fun of volunteering at the farm attracts volunteers of any age: retired folks, local community members, high school students, college students, scouts, and church groups. Each December, volunteers help prepare for the farm's two-day holiday greens sale, cutting greens, decorating balsam wreaths, and creating candle centerpieces. What more charming place could there be to purchase holiday greens than at the farm?

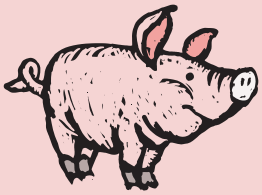
Fairmount Park initiated a number of new public programs at the farm in the spring of 2004, including "Tuesday Nights on the Farm," with a special outdoor movie night featuring none other than, "Babe." Over 100 parents and children spread blankets on the lawn in front of the Manor House to watch their favorite farm animals on the big screen. Enterprising 4-H youngsters, who realized there might be a profit to be made, popped popcorn and sold it along with lemonade and iced tea to raise money for their animal-grooming supplies.

Majestic sugar maple trees line the main road bordering the farm and the driveway leading into it, rendering the scene more reminiscent of a northern New England farm. In early February, the Park's environmental educators begin fastening sap-collecting buckets to the trunks in preparation for the farm's popular maple-sugar-





ing program. From February through mid-March, the period of the maple sugaring season here in Philadelphia, school groups learn the fine art of making maple syrup and sugar, drilling small tap holes into the trees, setting spiles just the right distance into the trunks, collecting sap, and boiling it over an open fire in a large copper sap pan. In the education building, they finish it off by boiling and stirring the thickening sap until it turns to syrup or sugar. In the process, the students learn photosynthesis, plant transpiration, evaporation, and tree identification, and listen to Native American stories of how maple sugar came to be. The sweet highlight of the sugaring season is the public festival, aptly named Maple Sugar Day, on the first Saturday in March. Volunteers flip pancakes outdoors while the Park's staff conducts sugar bush tours. For many of our visitors, this is their first experience tasting sap from a tree or sampling warm maple sugar candy straight from the fire. We enjoy telling visitors that Fox Chase Farm is the largest producer of maple syrup in Philadelphia County. As the visitors contemplate this amazing fact, their expressions turn from wonder and surprise to amused smiles as they realize that the farm is really the ONLY producer of maple syrup in this metropolis. (The only other producer is Fairmount Park's Wissahickon Environmental Center in the city's northwest section.)



The weekday school group programs are coordinated by the Philadelphia School District, but with an interesting twist. The farm tour guides are high school students from a nearby high school, Abraham Lincoln High School. Like professional educators beyond their years, the students greet the school buses when they arrive, talk with the students about the rules and regulations expected of them for the day, and lead them on a tour of the farm, explaining farming methods, animal care, and where our food ultimately comes from.

The farm boasts an active 4-H Club. Children from ages 8-18, don their "working" clothes each Saturday to help out at the farm, learning how to weigh the animals, trim the sheeps' feet, tag the pigs' ears, clean out the animal pens, and move the cattle from one pasture to another when the vet arrives. The 4-H youngsters are one of the highlights at the farm festivals, explaining the different breeds to the public, such as the Angus cows, Duroc pigs, and Suffock sheep, and walking the animals around on loose tethers so that parents and children can see the pigs and sheep up-close and personal. Five of the 4-H youngsters received their certification to be master sheep shearers and helped shear sheep at our Sheep Shearing festival in 2004. At the Pennsylvania State Farm Show in January 2005, the farm's 4-H club took champion, reserved champion, third, and fourth place in the pure breed Landrace pig breed.

Even those who would never think of actually walking onto the farm are enamored with the farm simply because of the beautiful views. The open green space and bucolic vistas of hayfields and old barns are a natural resource, one that is sadly disappearing throughout so many regions of the country. ☐

For information about the farm's school group program, call 215 728-5008. For information about Maple Sugar Day, Sheep Shearing, Applefest, Holiday Greens Sale, Saturday Open House, or Tuesday Nights on the Farm, call the Pennypack Environmental Center at 215 685-0470.