

Living on a small family farm, one derives joy and satisfaction from a different set of situations experienced by most. Manure spreading happens to be a superb example of this. As I await the first arrivals of our beautiful Icelandic lambs this spring, I content myself with the sight of flying dung. Let me just start by telling you that this happiness began last fall. My husband unexpectedly bought me a very sweet gift: a manure spreader. (I have a strong feeling that he did this to assuage his guilt over having bought himself a special motorcycle, The Rokon, which has the singular use of being a trail building machine.) I was quite thrilled, as we had been piling up sheep bedding pack for years. So, this spring, we wasted no time in giving that spreader a whirl. Now, I do quite enjoy seeing my husband spreading manure. He is what we call a "seriously reluctant shepherd". So, seeing him happily spreading manure on this 35 degree spring day gives me encouragement that someday he will come around to my way of thinking. Not that much has changed in the last five years with his attitude toward farming.... you know, with all the responsibility and financial investments that need to be made. But, he will gladly do any chore that requires use of the tractor, manure spreading included. It does get him hours of i-pod wearing solitude while I contend with the chaos of our four children back here at the house. I can see the appeal of it.

But, there is a more serious reason for loving the sight of manure spreading this spring. Our soils are in desperate need of amendments. We cleared this land from fairly mature forest, with lots of pine, just six years ago. What we were left with was land that is very acidic (5.1 pH) and lacking in fertility. The land would only support native grasses that are low in protein and nutrient content. Over seeding that we did with pasture mix and legumes was a failure. Acid soils don't have what it takes to support healthy plant growth, which in turns doesn't support healthy animal growth. Running an organic farm, we are highly reliant on the quality of the food we feed our animals as the basis of good health. So, we knew that we needed to address the soil first. This does not happen overnight. We started last fall with a substantial investment in liming our pastures. Being on a hill, the ag company needed to bring over their special creepy-crawly spreader to navigate the terrain. Of course, this cost us extra big bucks. But, this was the necessary first step to improving the soils. The lime will raise the pH of the soil, allowing the macro nutrients of the soil (calcium, magnesium, potassium, phosphorus) to become more available to the plant. This spring, we augment the good lime work we did last fall with distribution of our composted bedding pack all over the fields. I am now over seeding the manure spread areas with a mixture of three clovers and chickory. We are confident that we have invested wisely our dollars and time. The addition of lime has begun its good work; already this spring I can see ten times the amount of clover that I saw last year. So, I look forward to a more healthy grazing season this year for our Icelandic flock. Happy Spring!