

DUCKS AND FRIENDS IN A NURSERY

Owning a plant nursery can be a risky business. Given the whims of Mother Nature, the appetites of a textbook full of insects, and the weeds that think they're marketable horticultural wonders, it can bring many a furrowed brow. If you manage to make a living at it, growing and selling plants can be a very satisfying career.

Occasionally, a place in the country will provide distractions beyond the challenges of growing plants. Considering that fact, I offer below a few of those distractions to well, uh ... distract you from the daily grind of life inside the plant arena.

Friends of my brother, when they discovered the two cute little ducklings that they bought for their kids soon became rather messy pool guests, offered the cute little fellas (ducks, not kids) as potential workers in the nursery. After all, we had a large pond as our water reservoir, and Inky and Speedy possessed fine skills as far as ducks go. Somewhere in the negotiations, we agreed to provide them room and board for their alleged services. Inky, as you may surmise, was black and

Speedy, as you may also surmise, was fast on his feet. While their resumes detailed all the advantages of tenant ducks, they neglected to mention the incessant quacking for a hearty breakfast prior to actually doing any work. It didn't matter that I had to get workers (humans, not ducks) started. They stood outside my pickup truck door as I opened it, and vociferously reminded me of my part of the bargain. Apparently, in their minds, if they were first in line, then they should receive first service. Once I realized the futility of trying to ignore them, I began carrying a couple of cups of duck food in the truck to give them as soon as I arrived.

Once fed, the duo headed for the pond to inspect the pump, piping, and intake screen—at least that's what they always said they were going to do. Sometimes when I'd get back to the pond to check on things myself, I would find them on the edge of the pond doing some preening and relaxing. It must have been in the fine print that I didn't read, but I didn't realize just how many duck breaks came as a requirement in their contracts. They insisted that the time they took for breaks fell within industry standards.

My son was just a toddler at the time of Inky and Speedy. One of the more memorable scenes of their relationship came after lunch one Saturday when my wife and son came for a visit. The five of us (me, my wife, my son, Inky, and Speedy) took a leisurely stroll down one path leading through the plant beds. Suddenly, Inky and Speedy made a bee-line for something ahead of us. The image of two ducks waddling as fast as they could go with my son waddling right behind them is forever planted in my mind.

A few months later, Inky and Speedy had three of their geese cousins come for a visit to the farm. Apparently, they were not familiar with Ben Franklin's old saying, "Fish and visitors stink after three days". Fortunately, we had a very big pond. The big male goose had an attitude problem, though. He must have felt my presence was an intrusion upon his goosedom. He constantly nipped at the back of my leg whenever I got nearby. It wasn't so bad when he hit below the top of my boots, but it could hurt on the calf. One day I had enough. I turned around and kicked him—not hard enough to hurt him, but enough to gain his respect. We became 'Best Buds' thereafter.

Our neighbor on one side had a German Shepherd, and our neighbor on the other side had a black Labrador. These two got together, and the result was six puppies. I guess because our nursery was middle ground, they opted to rent space underneath our office trailer. Obviously, they came off as too cute and that seriously affected the rental rate. One little brown puppy was a shy one. When all the others would come charging out from their residence, he would stay under and peer out for a long time to make sure nothing scary loomed outside. One by one, their human owners found them permanent homes, which was probably all for the best. I did miss coaxing the shy one out as a distraction from the challenge of the plants for quite a while.

Not too long after we started building beds and getting drainage pipe installed, we bought a bunch of plants from a nursery that had gone out of business. Some of the material was really too tropical for our area, but it all came in one package. When a severe winter storm approached, I moved as much inside as I could and decided to leave the sprinklers running on the rest hoping to save as much as possible. The bed under sprinkler became a winter wonderland, rarely seen in our section of

Florida. With the coming of first light, ice statues drew countless visitors and cameras. Of course, we lost everything under the sprinkler, but we generated a lot of publicity for a long time.

One morning, I started up the forklift and moved it over to the potting area to load up a bunch of trees we had just moved to larger pots. I lifted up the first pot of the group and put it on the pallet that was on the forks. I turned back around to see a huge Diamondback Rattlesnake all coiled up among the pots and fast asleep. My commotion didn't wake him at all. Somewhere in my mind, I recall some sage advice about not waking a sleeping rattlesnake when he's only two feet away from you. Quietly stepping back, I grabbed an empty metal pot, turned it upside down, and gingerly set it on top of the snake. Then I added five bags of fertilizer on top to weight it down. The pot had drain holes near the top, so I knew the snake could breathe. A neighbor down the road worked for the Fish and Wildlife Commission, so I called him, and he sent someone out. They successfully captured the snake and took him to a less populated area. Believe it or not, he slept through the whole ordeal. He measured about eight feet long and had

beautiful coloring. I marveled at the magnificence of the creature, but I did not regret his departure.

Since we're on the subject of snakes, we had an old dump truck that I used to move dirt around while building the nursery growing beds. One day I got into the truck and started it up. All of a sudden, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye coming from underneath the dash on the passenger side. Then I heard a thud as something dropped onto the passenger side floor. A confused Cottonmouth Water Moccasin tried to figure out what had just happened. I had no confusion in my mind as to a quick exit from the truck. From a safe distance, I watched to see if the snake would also decide to exit the truck. When he did, I made a lot of noise inside the cab of the truck to make sure he didn't have any friends still inside. Then I pulled the truck up to the shop and plugged up every hole where anything could possibly get inside the cab. I never did figure out how that big snake got in there.

Another time, one of our workers decided to do a little fishing down at the pond on his lunch break. When I saw him coming back up the path from the pond, I could see he had something on the end of his line, but he was a little too far away to see what it was. As he got closer, I saw that he had

caught a two-foot-long alligator. My first thought was to look behind him to see if mama gator was following him. Fortunately, the little fella must have been running away from home, because I never saw another alligator on the property in all the years we were there.

There were many other critters that the ducks must have invited for a visit (I certainly didn't invite them). Among them were armadillos, skunks, a woodchuck, wild turkeys, wild boars, and deer. I would often complain to the ducks about all the visitors, but they seldom listened.

As far as all the distractions, I eventually learned to watch every step I took and just live with them (and, of course, write about them later).