

What Did We Learn This Year?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I had a professor in grad school that always managed to show up when we were in the middle of something not very enjoyable. Invariably his first comment was always going to be, “I know you’re not having any fun, but are you learning anything?” The first few times it was funny. A year later it had lost its novelty. That sort of describes how I feel about 2020. I know you may not have had a lot of fun, but did you learn anything?

I have a saying on the wall of my office that is attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson: “Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant.” Which brings up the second question of this column, did you plant any seeds this year?

One of the things that I’ve done this past year is to spend a little time reading the history of the 1918 pandemic. Halfway through it World War I ended and people got fed up with quarantining and wearing face masks and tried to go back to life as normal. Guess what happened? Yeah, a second wave that was even worse than the original infection. I guess what goes around really does come around.

As I read stories about the 1918 influenza pandemic. I remembered stories about settlers in the 19th century dealing with small pox and diphtheria. I often wondered what it was like to live through times like those. There were times you weren’t certain you wanted to go out in public. I never thought I’d experience that, but we have, and we aren’t through with it yet.

A lot of things were happening in early 2020 that in some ways made it a little easier for my wife and I to socially distance. We are fortunate to have a lot of hobbies that keeps me/us occupied along with working in my garden, yard and on the old farmhouse we moved in to. But I also recognize that many people don’t have hobbies. Isolating is harder on these folks and I do empathize with them.

I’ve learned a lot this year. Since we’ve had to change just about everything about the way we do what we do, it gave me the opportunity to try new things I’ve never tried before. I really enjoy doing programs in front of real people. I like the interaction and helping people learn new things. That last in person program I did was on March 10th. I drove to Wichita and did a program for the Wichita Science Café. I drove home that evening listening to the news of activities and events being cancelled left and right as the reality of a pandemic suddenly sunk in. In the weeks that followed I learned how to do programs via computer technology. I learned how to post educational tidbits on social media. Who knew that over 7,000 people would find it fascinating to learn about the connection between peonies and ants?

Had the pandemic not come along would I have taken the time to do these things? Probably not. But it gave me and many of us the latitude to experiment, to play, to try new technologies and new techniques because we had to. I’m a firm believer that the vaccine, if enough people will take it, can get us back to normal. But the new tools I’ve learned to use I will continue to use. But I can’t wait to get back in front of a room full of people and present a program again!

As we hurtle along toward the end of the year my new year’s wish for you is simple. None of us like wearing the mask and social distancing. But for now these are the tools we have to use so let’s use them. Take the opportunity to learn something new that maybe you’ve wanted to do for a long time! Don’t look at what we’re doing as an encumbrance but as a once in a lifetime opportunity. Be safe, be well, wear a mask and have a Happy New Year!