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Beekeepers: Hobby sweeter than honey

By RICK GREEN, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN Mar 8, 2019 Updated 11 hrs ago



Jeff McCormack of Gilmanston picks up a bee that had just left the hive. Bees leave the hive before they die as shown by the dozens of bees lying in the snow surrounding the supers. (Karen Bobotas/for The Laconia Daily Sun)

Karen Bobotas

GILMANTON — The temperature was in the teens and the wind was blowing when Jeff McCormack walked through the snow in his bee yard.

Several of his hives have survived winter. They are covered in black cardboard to absorb the sunlight and provide warmth for the bees inside.

Outside one of the hives, there were dead bees on the ground.



“That’s actually a good sign,” McCormack said.

It meant that the hive was active. Removal of dead or dying bees is a normal cleaning process for these very organized insects.

McCormack helped install cellular-telephone towers across the country before he took up beekeeping a few years ago.

“Bees are incredible,” he said. “I enjoy working with them, and there is always something new to learn.”

He keeps bee hives on a number of properties throughout the region.

From a barn that he built on his farm in Gilmanton, he sells bee colonies, hive boxes, veils, gloves, coats and other equipment to a growing number of people in the Lakes Region and elsewhere who have taken up the hobby.



Olivia Saunders, a specialist with the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, said she has seen an upsurge of interest in beekeeping.

“There are 10 or so clubs across the state, and most offer bee schools in the winter months,” she said. “Each of those classes have 25 to 100 students every year.

“On the one hand that’s great, but there is a steep learning curve, so the result can be a high mortality rate. If you’re not doing all the right things, you might lose your hive during the winter.”

Bee-ing successful

A big mistake some new beekeepers make is not providing enough supplemental feedings. During the warm weather months, bees often are given sugar water to get them through periods when natural nectar flows are not sufficient. During the cold weather, other supplemental nourishment may be needed.

To survive the winter, bees cluster inside the hive. They detach their flying muscles from their wings and vibrate those muscles to generate heat. Even on the coldest days, the center of the cluster should be more than 90 degrees. The bees transfer positions in the cluster so they all get to share the warmer temperatures in the middle.



If there are not enough bees in a hive before winter, they may not be able to keep warm enough to survive.

Key period

March is a critical time for bees. They need a few warmer days so they can exit the hive and go on flights to eliminate their waste.

“They are very clean, they don’t like to go to the bathroom inside the hive,” Saunders said.

“If we see yellow spotting on the snow, it means they’ve gone outside to go. We call it a ‘golden rain.’”

When the weather warms up and flowers bloom, bees collect pollen and nectar. They communicate the distance and direction to the best collection spots by performing a dance when they get back to the hive.

Helping bees

Gerard Godbill, president of the Pemi-Baker Beekeeping Association, said part of the club’s mission is to encourage people to provide a good environment for bees, which are essential for pollination of a range of vegetation.

“We talk to a lot of different groups and garden clubs, and encourage them to plant additional flowers and shrubs to help all sorts of pollinators,” he said. “We want to open people’s minds. They may not want to keep bees, but there are things they can do to help out the species.”

Use of pesticides and herbicides can be dangerous for bees.

Bees need water, so some gardeners fill a shallow container with pebbles or twigs to provide a safe place for them to land and drink.

Spring Fever

Ben Chadwick, of Spring Fever Farm in Alton, is one of the most successful beekeepers in the state.

At one time, he presided over 1,000 bee colonies. Now, at age 80, he keeps busy with 300 hives.

"I'm one of the few people that look forward to going to work every day of their lives," he said. "I enjoy the freedom, the self-employment."

It's not an easy business.

"If it's a good year, that's the year you might buy a truck," he said. "In the lean years, you don't buy anything. It isn't like going to work for, say, the state or the government. If you don't work, you don't get paid.

"You learn something new every year. Every season is different."

Yankee beginnings

Chadwick got his start in beekeeping at age 12, when his father, who was a hardware salesman in Marblehead, Massachusetts, took bees in trade from a woman who couldn't pay her bill.

"I happened to be standing there," Chadwick said. "My father said to me, 'Here, you have seven hives and you owe me \$35.'

"You did what your father said. There was no arguing, no nothing. It took me three years to pay off that debt. I sold him honey for 25 cents a pound, and he sold it in the store for 50 cents a pound.

"He wouldn't let me pay him back with my snowplowing, shoveling or lawn-mowing money. It was a Yankee thing."

Changing conditions

When Chadwick got his start, bee mites were not the problem they are today.

Now, the Varroa mite is a scourge of the industry. Beekeepers are on the lookout for a mite infestation, and will treat their colonies to stay ahead of the destructive pest. Fungal diseases are also a major problem.

The hive can also be decimated by a bear, skunk or other animals. Electric fencing is often used.

Another problem beekeepers must stay aware of is the natural tendency of bees to swarm, or leave the hive in a big group, if it is too crowded or if there are other problems.

If the swarm can be found, a beekeeper can catch it and start a new hive. This can entail climbing a tree to capture bees in an enclosure.

Honey flow

Chadwick doesn't get as much honey from his hives as he once did.

State efforts to eradicate Purple Loosestrife, an invasive plant, has reduced the amount of honey the bees produce, Chadwick said. The nectar flow from this flower is strong, leading to more honey production.

"I used to get 200 or 300 pounds from a hive," he said. "Now I'm lucky to average about 50 pounds."

Bee praise

In Laconia, another one of the region's most successful beekeepers recalls learning the skill from his father as a boy.

Ernie Bolduc, 85, had 13 brothers and sisters, but he was the only one interested in beekeeping.

"Watching my father do it was really something," he said. "I still do it the way I learned it with my father."

“I check the hives frequently in the spring, making sure the queen is laying eggs – if not, you replace her, or the hive won’t survive.”

He puts a small dab of nail polish on the queen so he can more easily identify her.

There are three main types of bees in a hive — the queen, the workers and the drones, whose only job is to mate with the queen.

The bees themselves can make a new queen by feeding a larva an exclusive diet of a special substance known as royal jelly.

Bee stings

Bolduc said he seldom gets stung.

“I usually suit up early in the springs, so they will get used to me,” he said. “They go by scent, so they come to know who I am.”

Later in the season, he will abandon the suit but continue to wear a veil when he works with the bees.

“They’ll work right along with me,” he said. “They’ll crawl all over me and as soon as I walk 15 to 20 feet away, they fly back.

“It’s a very friendly relationship between the bees and me.”

When it comes time to extract honey from the hive, he will once again suit up.

“If I took food off your plate, you would not allow me to do that either,” he said. “All the sudden, they are not my friends.”

When he needs to buy a new colony of bees, he sometimes orders them through the U.S. Postal Service. It’s not unusual for a couple bees to be flying outside the package.

“They called me once at 4 in the morning and said, ‘Ernie, come over here and get your damn bees!’”

“I said, ‘Don’t get all excited. They’re just trying to get inside with the queen.’”

Bee love

Like many beekeepers, Bolduc said he gets much more from bees than just honey.

“There isn’t a thing in the world as fascinating as the honey bee,” he said.

“I would rather deal with hundreds and millions of bees than I would the terrible politics in the world today.

“They are friendly. They are nice. I love them and work with them as much as I can. If the human race would only live the ways the bees do, this world would be so much better.”

Resources:

UNH Extension — <https://extension.unh.edu/resource/ten-things-do-save-bees>

Pemi-Baker Beekeeping Association — <https://www.pemibakerba.org>

McCormack’s bee farm — www.mccormacksfarm.com