

'Bout a 100 – Sideline Beekeeping

GET ORGANIZED

Self-Organization Is Essential – Working Smart

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You are busy. Indeed, we all seem to be busy. The college students at the local coffee shops in Kalamazoo sit all day complaining how busy they are, each with a laptop in front of them. For some of us, spending the afternoon over a cup of dark roast is more fantasy than reality. Who has time to fritter away hours of time when there is so much to do? Retirees seem to be the worst. Maybe they know that the clock is ticking, and they only have so much more time – the fact is that we all have just so much time left, and while we don't usually know how much that is, we generally want to spend it efficiently. The senior citizens among our ranks are often the folks who keep the local bee clubs organized, and tend to the political side of our state organizations.

If you have grown from a hobby beekeeper to a sideliner with about 100 colonies – or want to make that move – you suddenly realize that your 'bee thing' is taking an enormous amount of time. While you thought you would become much more efficient when you increased to a larger colony count, you find that there are days that you never even get to the 'to do' list, if you had time to write one out, but are busy filling jars for unexpected orders (which

means a check may come in to pay for those supplies you just ordered that are still sitting in the kitchen where the UPS delivery person put them, unassembled).

(Ironically, at the very moment I am writing this, the U.S. Post Office delivered a very large package from California. It now sits in my kitchen, unopened).

So how do we raise ourselves above the banal and achieve the exceptional in terms of our organization, our efficiency and our productivity? With the strong feeling that I really should not even be writing this, here are a few suggestions that will influence our beekeeping and other efforts.

Plan and Do Local Research

Too often I am asked questions by beekeepers who have found themselves in a mess they should never even considered getting into. While some have unexpected and usually unpredictable floods, high wind, fires and earthquakes, we should avoid putting our hives directly into harm's way – right on the fault line – so to speak. Many of the problems beekeepers find themselves in are a result of their failure to plan ahead, do research and work smart when they enter a beeyard.

Conduct Careful Research – Don't believe everything you read on the Internet or are told by another beekeeper. Check things out extensively, especially if you are getting started. In beekeeping it is pretty easy to pass yourself off as an expert, so be cautious while you make plans. Double-check your dimensions, your prices, your management plan and your inventory of tools and information. If you are new or relatively new, to beekeeping, you must have one or more mentors to talk with and learn from. Not all beekeepers do the same thing, and when you are doing things with your bees, ultimately it will be you who has to make the final decision on how to do things. Should you reverse hive bodies or not? If so, when? What does reversing do for the bees that they will not do for themselves? If you have been told to reverse your hive bodies in the spring, but you don't understand why you want to reverse the boxes (and not everyone believes this), you should learn that you never split the brood area so there is brood at the bottom of one hive body and at the top of the other.

When I was at a Northern Vermont meeting a number of years ago I was shown some Springtime splits. There was still snow on the ground, and it was early in the season. The beekeeper had strong over-wintered hives, but when the bees were split, some of the nuclei were not given enough bees to cover the copious amounts of brood placed inside each unit. Or maybe the older bees flew back to the parent hive. Then the weather turned



If you need a fast and dry source of smoker material, consider this method used by Rollie Hannan in Connecticut. He places a roll of binder twine into a plastic bucket. He will keep matches or a lighter there too, plus a spare hive tool. When using twine he separates the fibers and makes a little 'birdsnest' to light the fire. Once this is going well, he puts it into his smoker and adds bundles of the twine.

cold (it always turns cold after you make splits), and the bees went into cluster. The beekeeper wanted to know what was wrong with the brood, as it looked funny. Actually, it was not funny, but tragic, and had started to rot. The brood was dead, killed when the bees went into cluster. You could see that the center of the frames had been covered with bees, as the brood was healthy and bees were starting to emerge, but the outside parts were not based on the appearance of the brood. It was grey and the larvae and pupae inside were a funny color. It was clearly not a brood disease. There was an odor, but not like American foulbrood.

Many beekeepers want to split hives early in the season to have the bees in shape for apple and other fruit bloom pollination. Well, it can be done; splitting strong hives in early April in the 40-45th parallel can be done. But there are huge risks as described above. The benefit, if it works, is that in four to six weeks the increased hive is rapidly growing and actively foraging for pollen for the rapidly expanding brood area that needs to be fed. It also means that the beekeeper has a supply of early queens. And what happens when the queen producers are delayed by poor weather? It means the beekeeper in the northern states must adjust the schedule for making splits to fit the needs of the queen producer. Unfortunately, a late Spring for queen producers does not guarantee a late spring for pollination. Too often it is just the opposite!

So find out what works in your area. Since the Vermont beekeeper was in the northern part of the state, I felt his schedule was too early. He did more harm than good by making early splits. A delay of one to four weeks might have produced much better results. The question gets back to **how do you learn what works in your area?** The answer usually means that you need to talk to other beekeepers who manage bees the way you plan to manage bees, and do this in the same area where you plan to keep bees.

I applaud and encourage bee clubs and local associations, that have strong mentor programs, where each newbie (new beekeeper) is paired with someone with a bit more experience. But if you have been a hobby beekeeper for several years, who will be your mentor if you want to become a sideline beekeeper? Most bee clubs don't support sideline beekeepers very well. It will be up to you to find out whom you can visit, call, work with and generally pester until they throw you out the door

Work Smart

My EX is a great lady and a wonderful mother and grandmother. But when it came to doing some things, she was not the most organized worker. Especially in the kitchen. Every holiday she made a Jell-O ribbon salad that consisted of thin layers of different colors of Jell-O that alternate with some creamy mixture in between the colored layers. Kids and old people love the salad; they pick it apart and play with the colored layers. Some eat just the clear Jell-O parts; other just eat the creamy part. It has, however, been renamed the All Day Crazy Salad because it took her all day to make it and drove me Crazy. I renamed it. Part of the craziness was due to the fact that all the stuff needed to make the next layer covered every surface in the kitchen.

While this salad can be prepared in advance, it never was. The salad always seemed to occupy kitchen space

Does your honey extractor want to dance when you are not in the mood? Texas beekeeper John Knight made a concrete base for his small motorized extractor. As a 100-year old hobby beekeeper, Knight would rather go out to dinner with family and friends than dance with the extractor as it moves across the honey house floor.



when other things had to happen in the kitchen, like clean and stuff the turkey, peel the potatoes, whatever. I admit that the turkey and potatoes can be prepared in advance and warmed before serving, but I nominated the salad as the most logical item on the table that could be prepared in advance. My nomination, although frequent, was never accepted.

For beekeepers, working smart means putting together nuc boxes for splits during the Winter so all the frames are checked, scraped, repaired, and correctly positioned in the nuc boxes. Then, when they are needed in the Spring, they can be loaded on the truck and taken to the out yard and made up with greater efficiency. In each box, the space where the brood frames will go are occupied by frames holding foundation (as part of a comb rotation schedule), or drawn but empty comb. In addition, there is an empty frame and a food frame containing honey in the frame, saved from the past year. By using a frame of honey the bees are less dependant on your feeding them sugar syrup. If the frame contains some pollen, that is



California hobby beekeeper Bob Rice keeps his hive on a small deck overlooking the bay. This provides him a solid work space behind the hive, a solid base for the hive itself. This location also lets Rice check his hive from inside the house.



Rice puts feet on his screened bottom boards (from Rubes Bees). He paints the legs with a sticky material like Tanglefoot, a material that keeps ants and other crawling critters from occupying the hive. There is plenty of ventilation under the hive during hot days. More and more beekeepers are going to screened bottom boards for varroa mite control, usually combining their use with powdered sugar treatments and varroa-resistant stock.

fantastic, but you better have a supply of the latest bee protein mix (they are changing these formulations so fast I know many beekeepers use one product because change is so scary). The frames of foundation are put into the colony for expansion. If dated with the year, you can rotate the combs out of the colony on a rotational basis.

One advantage of this system is inventory. Once you have made up, say 100 nuc boxes with the frames and honey in place, that part of your job is done. When the bees are added in the field and the nucs set out, the empty pile it creates is feedback that you have done the job you set out to do. It's now time to do the next thing on your list. Or go fishing.

This is not the only way to do this. I often carried boxes of comb, honey and foundation into the out-apiary, and pulled the needed boxes to the end of the tailgate of the half-ton pickup truck. Then, as the nucs or splits were made up, the frames we needed to fill out a box were easy to find and just a few steps away. If the yard is set up so there are hives on two sides of a driveway, then the truck can be moved up to the next group of colonies. Or, if the apiary is arranged in a U shape, then the truck can be backed in and centrally located so it just a matter of a few steps to get to the vehicle.

When colonies are spread out, partially covered with brush and vegetation, and on uneven ground, it is pretty difficult to work efficiently.

Another part of Working Smart is to have all the supplies in the vehicle that you might possibly need. In addition to the hive tools (note this is plural), smoker with stopper (in a metal container so it is safer to drive down the street), smoker fuel, matches, queen cages, pencils, marker pens, nails, stapler, a hammer, first aid kit and of course Duct Tape. Add to this the need for moving screens, queen excluders and . . . Well, you must have a routine checklist when you go the out-apiary because you know you will forget something.

One idea I like is to use binder twine in rolls (as put into a hay bailer), placed into a plastic bucket. A hole in the center of the lid allows the twine to pull out. When frayed and shaped into a birds nest, this twine works as a great smoker material and can be kept on the truck and will stay dry. Matches can be kept in the bucket, as well as in your bee suit pocket, glove compartment, and in a secret stash in a heavy plastic bag buried under the third rock from the right in each bee yard. (You think I am joking, don't you?)

Honey House Organization – When all the hive bodies are in one place it is so much easier to load them and take them to the bees. The same is true of all equipment. Missouri beekeeper Jann Aerts color codes all his bee equipment so he can see the medium depth extracting supers and tell them apart from the cut comb supers because of the box color.

Keeping combs safe from wax moths is a huge part of equipment storage. Fumigation with paradichlorobenzene will keep the moths from getting into the comb, but this must be done correctly, following the directions. If wax moths are already in the combs, then they will continue to damage the combs. While this might seem to be a simple activity, the loss of combs every year by hobby and sideline beekeepers is staggering. While it may help remove old comb from the rotation, it should be part of a plan and not random.

Handle Once – A former administrator I worked under handled each piece of paper just once. He had a support staff that let him designate each item to someone immediately. I was impressed by this practice and have failed miserably to adapt its practice. True, I now strip the junk mail and envelopes at the first read of the mail, and sort any orders and checks into two piles. But this morning's piles are still on the table as I write this. It will take five seconds to put the bills into the bill drawer of my desk, and to put the checks by the computer for posting. But I did not do it.

I am always impressed with beekeepers who back up the truck and unload the truck of the day's work and then load it again for the next morning. If the entire world approached work that way our productivity would soar. Instead, we often unload as we reload, and we don't always have a list to work from. It may be 10 am when we finally pull out of the drive. That is a lot of wasted time and daylight. If you are paying someone to help, are you starting them at 7 or 9:45? How many hours of paid staff time have you wasted or been inefficient with?

Sideline beekeepers face unique challenges because, by my definition, they have another job or financial support. This means that their beekeeping efforts are secondary to something else, usually another employer. It makes it very challenging to be productive with beekeeping when your time is not your own. But little steps, like doing research, working smart, and handling each item only once, will increase your overall efficiency. **BC**

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