

BEEYARDS

Larry Connor

Learn to evaluate a beeyard location before you move.

As important as it is to apiary management, the geographical positioning of beeyards is a frequently overlooked part of a beekeeper's operation, especially in the case of hobby and sideline beekeepers. If you are keeping fewer than 100 colonies of bees, chances are the locations you use to keep these bees resulted from a combination of fate, necessity and maybe some dumb luck. I suspect many beekeepers would keep all of their colonies around the house if it were not for the influences of family, neighbors, and local laws prohibiting such a behavior. Of course, I'd hope that any beekeeper worth his or her salt would realize that there are very good reasons why colonies should be spread out to maximize honey production.

Here are some reasons why you may not want to keep bees in a certain location, at least not all year. On the other hand, these may work out just fine:

1. Your best friend's brother wants bees there so he can look at them when he visits from the big city because it reminds him of when Dad kept bees there in the 1950s. If the area has grown up over the years and there are many houses and little forage in the area, you may need to find an excuse to NOT put bees there. Or maybe put some old boxes out that contain no bees at all, saying you are attempting to trap bees in the hives.

I actually have this request, and the location is pretty good, right on the edge of a corn/bean field (depending on the contract farmer's rotation). There are several reasons why this could work out very well. First, the bees would be over one-eighth mile from a busy county road and hidden by mature trees, even in Winter. The field takes up the large part of 20 acres, and is open and sunny. Second, the colonies will be visible from the house and garage, so any disturbances would be easily noticed. Third, there is a solid gravel road out to the field, and packed earth from heavy farm equipment along the edge. Fourth, the brothers are happy to ask the contract farmer to plant a legume mix to my specification (I'd combine several clovers and

alfalfa) with the understanding that the hay would be cut *after* the bees had filled a super or more of honey. Fifth, there are few children, bikers, snowmobilers or hunters that visit the area so both the liability and risk of damage to hives are low. Sixth, the location is close to the rest of the bees I might put in the area, so it will be efficient to move from yard to yard. Finally, there is a constant supply of coffee and lemonade at my best friend's house, and who wants to work that hard?

There are a few down sides to the location. A commercial beekeeper moves bees onto a farm about half a mile down the road for the Summer. While this may reduce the productivity of my hives, my main concern is not knowing where have these bees been and what they might carry into the area. The landowner says he brings the bees up from Florida, so they could be packed with small hive beetles and even carry the risk of some African genes in those colonies. Few commercial beekeepers keep bees the way a lot of 100-colony owners do, especially in regards to mite and disease control. Do I want 30 colonies providing a flood of *Varroa* mites into the area every Summer as the drone production stops and worker brood production slows? It is something significant to consider before setting up the apiary at my best friend's field.

One solution might be to talk to the neighbor and see if she would let me put my bees in the location on a year-round basis. She did complain once that the beekeeper had forgotten her yard rent for a few years, and might like to get him off the property. Now I have to weigh the beekeeper relation part of this situation. Do I want to annoy another beekeeper to get a location I really don't need but should occupy to protect my *other* bee colonies?

2. You have a pollination rental for some crop, let's say pumpkins, and the landowner says he has no problem keeping the bees there all year. What should you do?

How far is this location from the center of your beekeeping activities? Are you driving 40-60 miles for the pollination rental? If so you may want to leave the bees

An open spot in the vegetation allowed the beekeeper to back up the truck and unload the bee colonies in a double row of hives. There is probably some drifting with this setup. If these were my bees, I'd be afraid someone might load them up as easily as I unloaded them. They are visible from the road and there is a good roadbed.





Looking for an apiary site? Get someone to take you up in a small plane! From a few thousand feet you can see roadbeds, lakes, ponds, swamps and potential forage. The farm has a hard roadbed running most of the length and Christmas trees may or may not provide suitable bee forage if the grower mows the "weeds" or not.

closer to home because you cannot keep an eye on them and the cost of fuel keeps going up, so it might cost a case of honey or two in lost income every time you have to drive out there. Plus, distant locations are a classic case of out of sight, out of mind, and you have to force yourself to drive over and visit them.

Knowing that pumpkins are often grown in smaller fields than corn and beans, so you should consider the potential forage surrounding the area. Are there crops in the area that require extensive insecticide use that may kill your bees? Look at a map (use Google Earth) and draw a circle of one mile and two miles around the field. Are there high-risk crops (as far as the bees are concerned), or are their woodlots, vacant fields and large farms/farmettes in the area? If this is a huge honey producing area, it might work out well, but if it is not, I'd move bees to a closer apiary.

Consider the attention the grower will give to the bees. And the respect she will give to you. Or not! Will she call and tell you the lids blew off during a windstorm and she replaced them for you to save a trip. Or will she call at 11 pm some evening to tell you to move the bees before seven so they can install new irrigation equipment?

Another thing to carefully consider is the type of farming operation this is. If it is a pick your own setup with many vegetables and berries, your hives may be an attractive source of amusement to children (up to the age of 105) and somebody will get stung. So, unless you feel the bees are well out of sight of the public, you may not want to leave your bees there longer than the pumpkin bloom in midsummer. Here's a case where moving the bees to purple looserstrife, Japanese knotweed, goldenrod and/or aster may be the right decision.

Some other issues to mull over: Will you get stuck driving into the field to tend to the bees? How about in the spring when the ground turns into sandy loam and clay soup? That stuff is just plain miserable to walk through carrying feed cans. Also, will the colonies be exposed to prevailing Winter winds? They need at least a fencerow or building to create a wind barrier.

Finally, how much income were you getting from this pollination rental? Will you feel obligated to waive or reduce that income source because it is now an apiary



This is the same farm. It shows a possible place for a row or two of bees along the end of this drive. The bees could face east for morning sun, and receive considerable wind protection from the prevailing westerly winds. It would be away from traffic, and anyone visiting the bees would need to drive past the farm residence.

location? How about paying hive rent and charging full pollination fees for the work your bees are doing.

Number of colonies in one location

The hive count for a particular location depends on many factors. For starters, my 20 colonies may not be the same as your 20. I may have four over-wintered (and thus hopefully very strong) colonies and 16 two-frame nuclei hives just barely covering the frames. On the other hand you may have 20 colonies busting at the seams and ready to swarm. It may take four or more nucleus hives to produce the population needed to equal one permanent hive.

In terms of bee population one Russian colony in March may have a quarter the bee population of an Italian colony you have been feeding since mid February with pollen substitutes and candy boards. So even the over-wintered colonies can be hard to compare. Nobody wants to count bees, but an astute awareness of the gross number of bees foraging in the neighborhood might be useful in determining colony numbers in one location.

Certainly most beekeepers want to keep as many colonies as they can in one location. Unfortunately, the capacity of a certain location changes from *year to year* and *within the season*. For example, a woodsy spring yard with alder, soft maple, early tree fruits, dandelion may be a wonderful yard for wintering bees and early spring buildup due to early Spring bloom. But by the time these plants are finished, the location may be over for the season - unless the woods is filled with tulip popular, basswood (linden), catalpa and/or black locust trees. Then the season may extend into the end of Spring. Then while other locations are busting out with legumes and other Summer flowers, the woodsy location is barely able to support a half dozen colonies, and not very well at that.

Some beekeepers are perfectly happy, and fully within their rights as members of a democracy, to keep bees in one location without moving a single one. The bees can consume the honey produced from the Spring tree flowers, and the beekeeper can relax and do something else for the Summer and Fall. There is always a chance the bees will consume these early season stores and not survive the Winter. So the beekeeper may harvest the honey in



Horses might be fun to watch and feed apples to, but as guards for beehives, they have not been very satisfactory. This South Dakota commercial site is open and dry. Just perfect for sweet clover production in the Summer. It is not ideal for year-round location.



An apiary in Wyoming. This is a Summer location, near the yellow sweetclover. A nice hard roadbed provides easy access. Not knowing how high the Spring water level gets, I would not place bees in this location for the Winter and Spring without asking about local conditions. As a Winter location this one is probably too open and the bees probably head for California and the Almonds.

late June or July and then feed the colonies in the late Summer and Fall as needed. Feeding may be easier than relocating an apiary.

For permanent apiary sites, I like to try a reasonable number of hives for the region, and adjust as experience instructs. So, a dozen hives in one location that average 150 pounds of honey may indicate that it is a good idea to place 18 or 24 hives the next season. But if a yard of twelve hives is barely able to produce a super of honey each, may need a reduction in the colony count, or just move it to another location if there are yards that have done better.

Most hobby and sideline beekeepers dislike moving bees, which may require borrowed trucks and recruiting not-quite-willing help. The easiest time to move colonies is when they are small, either in the Spring, or after you have made a number of increase colonies in the form of nucleus hives. If you have four hives in one good Spring location, split them four ways and leave four nuclei hives behind to build back up for the season, the remaining 12 colonies will fit onto your pickup. The 10-frame equipment can be kept in the location, neatly stacked, of course, until the nucs require expansion room.

G.M. Doolittle kept a permanent out-apiary, as he called it. The yard was set up as a grid, three rows of 10 colonies, and when a colony died it was replaced from within the apiary by making up a increase colony over

a queen excluder. He did not want to move boxes back and forth, risking upsetting the horse as it pulled the wagon, or making a mess in the new 1904 automobile. There were 30 colonies in the apiary, located outside Syracuse New York in farm country. I like this concept, but I have not done it like Doolittle. I would like to set up an apiary at my friend's farm with a set number of hives and not move them. His place is as rural as you get in southern Michigan – that is, it has a mixture of farms and large residential lots (five and 10 acres) that will not be further subdivided. The biggest attraction is the potential diversity of flowers attractive to bees that runs all season long, including spotted knapweed, sweet clover and the flowering trees that will support colonies until August. Then in late August the goldenrod and aster are relatively plentiful.

A dozen colonies in this location should do well. I don't think I will start with that many for a variety of reasons, considering the fact that I am lazy, travel a lot, and my friend will be of no help to me whatsoever, except for serving coffee and watching from a distance from a comfortable lawn chair. **BC**

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