

# 'Bout a 100 – Sideline Beekeeping

## FACING THE CHALLENGES OF SIDELINE BEEKEEPING - HONEY

Larry Connor

### Honey: Too Much or Too Little

Two issues back I listed 10 challenges facing mid-sized beekeepers in the United States. We have discussed queen problems and bee forage/nutrition. Next on my list of challenges facing sideline beekeepers is the subject of Honey: Having too much or too little.

### Finding that Balance

I am never sure what the motivations are when someone starts with their first hive of bees. Newbees frequently talk about a lot of things – from pollinating the garden to having fresh honey for the table. Some not-yet-beekeepers tell me they want to get bees because they own some property and want to have bees there. An old friend wants me to put bees 'back' into an old bee tree just like his father had. I had to explain that is I not as easy or as legal as may seem. He just wanted to watch the bees fly in and out of the old maple while he trimmed the hedge, I guess. Other new beekeepers point to their flock of children and say that they want to raise the kids on honey instead of sugar. These folks are usually passionate about becoming beekeepers and producing a lot of honey. Frequently the older children are helping with the bees, which is an excellent idea.

At some point every beekeeper runs the risk of being blessed (some say cursed) with a large crop of honey. Honey production is highly variable even for established beekeepers. Professional and semi-professional beekeepers attempt to level out the honey production by using several techniques:

1. Chase the nectar crop – Find the areas where you can place hives that will almost always produce a honey flow from a certain group of flowers. This may be a woody area with basswood (more dependable as a nectar producer) and black locust (undependable). Both trees may bloom when the weather turns cold and rainy, and the flow is extinguished. By the way, rain does not wash the nectar out of the flowers, but for the most part, the nectar is reabsorbed by the tree or plant and the sugar energy is stored for future use. That may be in nectar production the next day or used for plant growth.

Other crops are worth moving bees for production, or setting up permanent apiary sites. I would seek plants like sweet clover, spotted knapweed, sunflower, purple loosestrife (where not being eradicated), goldenrod, and aster. Where grown, chase after the orange blossom honey, the tallow, the cotton and soybean flows (soybeans produce in only parts of the country where varieties and climate cooperate to produce nectar). Every part of the country, and

every country on the planet, has unique nectar sources. One of the first things a new beekeeper MUST learn is the plants in his or her area BEFORE they will be able to move forward and grow a beekeeping operation.

2. Annual carry-over of last year's crop – The larger the beekeeping operation, the larger the chance of holding over buckets or barrels from the previous year. Many professional beekeepers hold honey because the price is low. Others hold honey because they want to make sure they have a guaranteed supply of a certain honey that is often hard to find, like buckwheat, mints, gallberry and other unique plants that are produced in limited areas or are only produced in small quantities. Storing honey may be an added expense. You must have a safe place to store the honey. It must be of low enough moisture that there will be zero fermentation and risk of loss of the crop.

3. Establish a network of reliable suppliers – It is my observation that honey from different states, but from the same nectar source, will produce a remarkably similar honey in taste, aroma and other physical properties. There may be considerable variation in the other nectar (and pollen) producing plants that contribute to the ultimate product, so there will be variation in appearance (the most noticeable aspect). So clover honey from North Dakota may be water white, but from Pennsylvania it may be mixed with a large number of Summer wildflowers that darken and change the flavor. So here is my advice: find someone who is producing honey like your own, from the same plants but also from similar conditions. If you are a 2,000-colony beekeeper you may want to find a 2,000-colony operation in your state or a nearby state that will



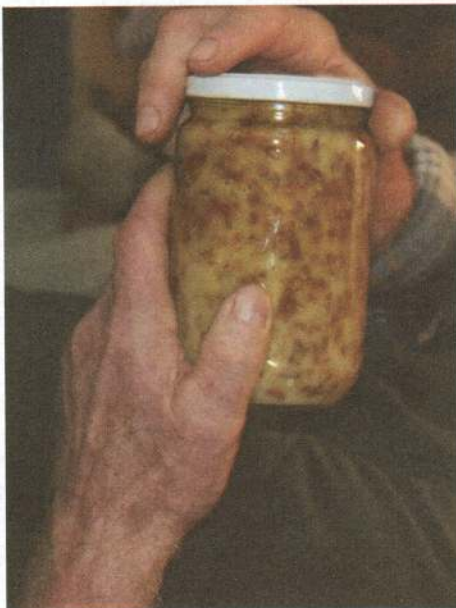
Comb honey frame with legs. Small pieces of triangular plywood are fastened to the ends of the honey frame to allow a plate to be placed under the honey and allow the customer to keep the honey on the table for daily use.



*Acacia and Spring flower display in France. At the time of the visit the Euro was 1.28 US Dollars. The containers are half kilo in size. The unique nectar sources in France demand higher prices.*

be able to supply you wholesale honey, allowing you to have continuous sales of honey from year to year and all year long. But don't just assume that the larger producer will have three barrels of blueberry honey in April next year. It will probably be gone when you call in late March to place your order. Instead, you must communicate in advance, and let him or her know that you are short on your crop and that you will most likely need extra honey to get through the year. Agree to a date you will commit to the order and when he can sell to someone else. Cultivate these relationships carefully, and do not abuse the supplier of honey you need to purchase to fill in the gaps in your production.

4. Establish a seasonal rather than year-round market – Semi-professional or sideline beekeepers are certainly entitled to be seasonal in their honey sales. You may produce 500 or 5,000 jars of honey this year and attempt to sell them all from September to December. This eliminates the cost, inconvenience and daily pressure of keeping a shop open all year long. It requires that you educate your customers, in advance, of the nature of your business. A sign posted at the cash register should



*Jar containing a mixture of creamed honey and bee pollen.*

read: We will close December 31<sup>st</sup> and reopen September 15 next year. A flier or postcard in the customer's sack or box of products should reinforce this idea. I grew up on a farm that sold apples, and the season ran from late August to about Thanksgiving. After that the apples were in storage for a few months, but were used to meet the needs of a certain grocery store. By mid-Winter, even the best 'keepers' were past their prime and were sold off or discarded. As an industry we look at honey as an international commodity, but as semi-professionals, we see honey as a fresh farm product that should be sold like other seasonal products are sold. This may completely rewrite your business plan, but it is one that you can accept: get the money into the bank during two to four months of the year and have it available as the bills for equipment, sugar and bees come in the next season. I think the short selling season reduces your costs and frees you to do other things for yourself and for your bee operation.

5. Have a plan for year-around retail markets – You have worked hard to get shelf space at the local health-food store, and it is imperative that you have honey on the shelf 12 months a year or the shop owner will give your space to someone else. How should you approach that sales and marketing situation? One approach might be to consider having two lines of product. One is based solely on your honey production in the county or corner of the state where you live. If you sell clover honey from North-East Kansas on your label, you should not sell honey from across the line in Missouri, even though the honey is essentially the same (the problem here is how you have written your honey label). But you could just as easily have two products. You could have honey labeled that says that it is certified to be from Beeville County, demanding a much higher price (to justify the extra expenses), and placed on the shelf as it is available. Once it is gone, it is gone. You do not attempt to find like honey to fill the space. Instead, have a second line of Mid-west honey, that you can supply year around, but purchased from beekeepers in your state or nearby states, and containing a product that is a lot like your own. This might be a little bit less in price, but not too much, since you are attempting to fill the upper end of the market with locally produced honey, and you are selling a seasonal product year-round. You are NOT selling honey as an international commodity, with honey purchased from foreign countries and sold at a discount. There are already plenty of professional packers who do this well, and probably at a much lower price. You MUST sell your unique location, of where the honey is produced.

6. Develop a floral market for your honey – In November I was in southern France and was once again amazed at how they are able to sell honey in small containers at very high prices. Why? Because they are selling a locally produced, floral based product that both the local consumers and the tourists are willing to buy. There were jars of chestnut, rosemary and lavender honey for sale, as well as honey from certain regions of France, Italy and Spain.

One of the concepts I want to share from France is this: You do not need to have a huge number of hives to make a living there if you know how to sell your honey. You may be able to be a full-time professional beekeeper



French Honey Shop.

with 400 colonies. These colonies maximize production, produce a range of products (honey, comb honey, honey vinegar, mead, beeswax and candles, propolis ointments, royal jelly), and sell at a home shop at a premium price. For many years the French beekeepers have created unique products. For example, I visited one retired postal worker who makes a number of unique products. He has considerable production in comb honey. He also makes and sells a creamed honey and a pollen mixture that is very popular with a certain segment of his market. He also sells a frame of comb honey that he has added a narrow triangular piece of wood to the end bars so the frame stands alone on the table. A plate is placed under

the honey to catch any drips as the honey is cut from the frame and consumed. The honey can stay on the table for morning coffee. It is a simple concept, but it means the beekeeper has educated his customers on what the product is (local honey produced in a frame with thin foundation), and that the honey is locally produced. While some U.S. beekeepers might discount such a product, considering it a form of bulk honey, this is not the case in France, where this is sold at a premium and the price is high. In a country where many people purchase bread every day and carry it under their arm while riding their bike, the emphasis on locally produced, fresh product is extraordinary.

You control the way you answer the question or challenge of too much or too little honey. If you are new to beekeeping and produced 200 pounds per colony in Michigan in 2008, tell yourself that it was an exceptional year. Next year you may be like the beekeepers in Virginia, where the honey crop was close to being a failure. It is the nature of honey crops to be variable, and we as beekeepers are limited in our ability to control nature. For the sideline beekeeper it is a real challenge to find a workable plan to address this challenge. **BC**

*Dr. Connor is currently planning road trips for 2009. He has preliminary plans to be in Oklahoma and Texas in April, and is trying to plan a queen rearing and bee-breeding program for the Northeastern states in the Spring. If you are on the way to or from these locations, and want to plan a visit, contact him at [ljconnor@aol.com](mailto:ljconnor@aol.com).*



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