

'Bout a 100 – Sideline Beekeeping

TIME: HOW CAN I MANAGE IT BETTER?

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Making More Efficient Use Of Our Time

Time: How can I manage it better?

Is there a way I can work a 40-hour week (that is often over 50 hours) and still run 25 to 250 colonies? What do I have to prepare myself for to do it?

Finding the best use of our time to carry out beekeeping activities is a huge challenge facing semi-professional beekeepers everywhere because of the pressures of the other job, family, and scheduled recreational events. During the busy time of the bee season (March-June in the temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere), there are huge demands on our time. This article will help us focus our planning/scheduling and making more efficient use of our valuable time.

Visiting different beekeepers reflect huge differences in the management approaches they practice. Take one middle-America beekeeper who was in the process of adding supers to his colonies. His approach is direct, efficient, but not very bee friendly. Empty frames in supers, mostly drawn combs, were loaded onto the truck the night before the workday ended. The next morning the out apiary was visited and supers were added, two or three boxes per colony, depending on colony strength. No hive inspections were made during this time, for the beekeeper had a good idea of the strength of the colonies from previous visits, and was attempting to get the supers on the colonies as quickly as possible.

The truck was driven to the first group of bees in the apiary, where colonies were positioned on either side, and the vehicle was left running. Colonies had their covers removed (all migratory lids), and the boxes placed over the brood nest. To speed the process, no smoker was lit and no effort was made to placate the bees. There was an approaching rainstorm and there were many unhappy colonies. But as fast as the boxes could be lifted off the truck they were placed onto the hives, the lids returned as soon as the boxes were placed.

As one group of colonies was finished, the beekeeper

Ted Miksa is about to close the door of the bee truck in the queen yard of the Miksa Honey Farm in Groveland, Florida. The handwritten list has just about everything on it needed for catching queens and servicing mating hives. The first item listed is "bees", while the last is "Gas for Truck".



jumped into the truck and advanced it enough to the next group so the supers were not carried more than a few feet from truck to hive. He wore a full bee suit and veil, gloves and a determined look. There were many bees in the air hitting the veils and the windscreen of the truck. The truck was emptied in less than an hour and the bees were ready for the white sweet clover that was starting to bloom in the area. No time was wasted lighting the smoker, carrying boxes of supers some distance from the truck, or worried about crushing a few bees as the lids were piled on the supers. While it is possible to add supers on a nicer early summer day with a smoker and minimum bee upset, this beekeeper did the job quickly and moved on to the next apiary. He had many colonies to super and the flow had already started. He figured he was losing money every day the supers were not in place.

Compare this beekeeper's system to that of another (actually a hybrid of several people), I have visited over the past few years.

The beekeeper keeps a hundred colonies in the southern part of the state for early buildup. The bees are 200 miles away but spread out over 50 miles. Just getting to the bees meant the truck and trailer had to be loaded and driven down the night before. So far this is a pretty common beekeeping experience in an effort to get Spring splits.

At the first beeyard, the truck is parked at one end of the yard, and every time the beekeeper needs something, he walks to the truck to get it. This includes extra frames, pollen, sugar syrup for the division board feeders, spare feeders, a better lid, and queen excluders. It might be easier to work on one group of bees at a time, near the truck, where all needed equipment is ready to use. Move the truck instead of spending time walking hundreds of feet to get something.

Or think about dropping off extra equipment at every few hive stands and having extra material piled up where it is close. Extra equipment taken off the bees can be just as easily stored in the piles, using bottom boards and lids to keep bees from robbing out removed combs and deadout colonies (there always seem to be new deadout colonies nowadays).

On the way out of the apiary, pickup and load the material onto the truck. Make sure you tie down the load, even if you are driving a short distance.

Instead of risking the overheating of a queen in the truck, carry a few extra queens (in cages) in a canvas bag tied around the waist or in a carpenter's apron, making sure you can find what you want when you are wearing gloves and your fingers feel like rubber sausages. Or work a bit more carefully and retire the gloves. *Recent memo to self: when the entire crew is wearing heavy-duty bee gloves, it is time to put some on. When the crew is not wearing them, you probably will not need to wear them. Funny how that happens.*

This beekeeper spent a great deal of time driving the

50 miles from one yard to the other, moving the increase colonies to minimize drifting. Many hours of the beekeeper's time were spent in the truck and not working bees. Or sleeping. There are a lot of beekeepers on the road who have not had a full night's sleep for weeks.

Some General Guidelines

1. Make a list and post it in the honey house and in the truck. This list should include everything needed for a visit to an out apiary away from the home base. But it works for work at home too. The list has two parts: things to take to the apiary and things to bring back from the yard when finished. If queens or cells need to go out to a mating yard, chances are that mated queens need to come back to the home base. While that sounds logical, failing to check the hive tops of mating nucs may result in a loss of queens inadvertently left behind. Or always put them into another canvas bag you carry with you.

From feed needs (sugar syrup, pollen patties), extra equipment, frames of brood and bees, frames of honey and/or pollen, take all the sorts of things that one might need in a beeyard during buildup and queen mating. Don't forget cages for spare queens, virgins, queen candy and marshmallows for introduction. You know what you need to take to the yard. Make the list. Once back from the yard, sit down and refine the list so it works better on the next trip.

If that checklist eliminates one return trip to get something you forgot, it will pay for the time you spent writing it out. Plus, the process of making the list will force yourself to organize your apiary visit. What can you realistically expect to do in one visit? What can you do that will eliminate a return visit?

2. Don't make work for yourself! What are some of the things that have slowed you in the apiary? Have you let robbing get started by leaving combs set open? Have you spilled syrup to trigger robbing? Have you forgotten your hive tool, smoker, smoker fuel, matches/lighter, or veil and had to work without? Do you have a problem keeping your smoker lit. For heavens sakes get someone to show you how they do it so it stays lit!

Have you invested in an extracting setup that is hard to clean? Do you leave it alone without cleaning as a result and the residual honey granulates and either blocks

future use or seeds the honey with crystals as you start to fill jars? Do you have drains in the honey house or do you have to mop up the wash water and squeeze it into buckets to dump down the drain in another room?

Are there ways you can simplify your work? Are there practices that prevent problems from developing? For example, if you have small hive beetles in your area, you are learning or already know that stored comb may turn into in a huge mess in just a few days. So bring in just the amount of honey in supers from the hives that you can process. Don't let the honey sit in the combs over the weekend. This reminds me of cutting a hay crop - don't cut more than you can put up before the rain starts. Watch the weather, your spouse's schedule, and your scout/church/reunion plans you have made promises to participate and help at. That honey will most likely remain on the hives that produce it for a few more days without any problems, so you have time to take it off and extract it as you realistically can handle. This is not permission to be lazy, but strong advise to work smart.

3. Grow your operation, don't EXPLODE it! I only wish I had one dollar for every dreamer beekeeper who has explained to me in great detail how he/she wants to expand rapidly and make a lot of honey. If you have ten colonies, is it realistic to jump to 100 in one season? A lot of new beekeepers think so. There are a few lessons that have been learned by others that I should share:

a. There are points in expansion where everything changes. Somewhere between 50 and 150 colonies run for honey production you will want to upgrade the size of your honey extractor, honey truck (or finally get one), honey house (or build one), work schedule (especially if you are working full time somewhere else), and a lot more. Add to that some paper things: insurance coverage, workman's comp for your part time employee and maybe even a change in marital status! Are you working alone, or is your spouse/partner helping? At 150 colonies there will time when you will need help, reliable help that will show up at 7 am when you want to leave for the bee yard and put in a full day's work on your rare and precious day off.

b. Then around 400 to 600 colonies this all happens again. Your truck is too small, the extractor cannot handle the volume of honey. You need help, and your spouse



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has left you a note that you have an appointment with a divorce lawyer. You have started to add onto the honey house but run out of money, or time, or both, and the project is stalled until you get the check for the last honey you sold or the pollination contract. You have gone from handling hives one at a time to a pallet system and a forklift. You have to store and insure these things, and make sure you have adequate locations for all the bees, perhaps in southern and northern locations.

4. Worker smarter, not harder. There may be little surprise in the number of beekeeper's sons and daughters who run fewer colonies than their parents did. They saw, as children, how many late nights were spent building frames, extracting honey, filling bottles and making deliveries. Maybe they noticed that the crop was sold quickly, and the older generation had to buy other honey to fill orders. Here are some of the "new generation" business plans I have heard lately:


a. Reduce the number of beehives, and sell all the honey at maximum retail price. Stop selling good local honey at wholesale prices, but get the maximum for the crop. Move to varietals, by plant communities, and charge. One Alaskan beekeeper reports that he sells a 60 pound bucket of fireweed honey for \$900.00. The smart beekeeper knows that the demand for local honey is increasing, and buyers want a relationship with the honey producer. Certainly not all beekeepers have the personality or temperament to sell honey at local farmer's markets or community festivals, but some local participation will create a viable identify link for the honey user with the honey producer and develop some sense of product loyalty. That is something that you can take to the bank only if you have produced enough honey to sell at the local level and not run out. So, cut back on the number

of places where you sell your honey at a low price and raise your prices. If you have strong competition from a low-ball priced beekeeper, don't compete in that store anymore if the manager wants you to match the price. Move to another venue and sell at a higher price. Don't madly chase after EVERY place to sell your honey, but go for the high-end markets where your product will be appreciated and your higher price will be paid.

Reducing your colony count will give you a chance to increase production of added products, from creamed honey, flavored creamed honey, beeswax soaps, creams, polishes and more. Add a few candles and your favorite honey dipping sauce. Instead of selling one jar of honey to a customer sell honey, soap, lip balm and other products to the same people. What might have been a \$4 or \$5 sale will let you keep most of a \$20 bill, and the customer is happy. Get your special jalapeño pepper creamed honey out with the pretzel sticks and ask the guys if they are *man enough* to try a sample. They will be new customers taking several jars to share with their buddies.

5. Don't let the value added products ruin your life either! If you have to make honey soap every night after work, you might think that you have been too easy listening to these ideas. So again, build slowly. There is nothing wrong with running out of a product at the end of a farm market or community festival because you will have people buying earlier and earlier to make sure they get the product they want. **BC**

In June and July Dr. Connor is teaching a class of new beekeepers at the family farm in Galesburg, MI. He is offering his last queen rearing class of 2009 over the middle weekend in July. If you want to know more, contact LJConnor@aol.com.



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