

# Changing The Way We Train New Beekeepers

*Teach them the right way*

It was over a year ago when the editor of this publication and I discussed the newest surge in interest in bees and beekeeping. We attributed it to a number of factors: the aging Baby Boomers looking for something to do when they retired; a reaction to all the 'we need bees' publicity that arose from the fantastic Colony Collapse Syndrome media attention (which continues as networks rerun their feature stories); and the growing interest in producing food locally, a phenomenon that has many names and comes from many social and political viewpoints.

The Editor made a comment to the effect that "And we will see many of these people get out of bees in a year or two, like we have before, because now it is more difficult." I asked 'isn't our job to change that situation,' but he remained silent or repeated what he had just said.

Starting with the time I was in graduate school at Michigan State University, I have been involved in the education of new beekeepers for over 40 years. Basically the questions are all the same, but the answers to questions take a lot more time than they did in the late 1960s. That was a time before tracheal mites, *Varroa* mites, small hive beetles, CCD, neonicotinoids, and African bees. In the 60s the biggest problems were American foulbrood, wax moths, pesticide kills and low honey prices.

While the latter have NOT gone away, we now have a growing need for more a much more complete information set that must be given to new beekeepers as they start their course in setting up a beehive.

Unfortunately, many beekeepers still start out the same way that many did 40 years ago: they order bee equipment from a supply dealer, order a package of bees from that same supply dealer, get a 10-minute demo of how to install the package, and get a pat on the butt with a parting 'you can do it kid, it's not that difficult.'

If there was ever a formula for failure, that certainly comes pretty darn close.

As a kid I read *Starting Right with Bees* and most of a much thinner version of *The Hive and the Honey Bee*. We got a package of bees or two and put them into hives and watched them grow. Two neighbors and an uncle were on call if we got into trouble – and I have no idea how much they did without our knowing to keep the hives alive. Mostly we got the bees into the box with foundation and came back in August to take out some honey. There were some brood inspections, because photos exist showing a neighbor helping one of my brothers. I probably took the photo.

Yes, package bees can still work. But there is so much more to know and understand. And, as most of you know, there is a growing disgruntlement with packages as a way of starting a new colony, a fact I make in *Increase Essentials*. But the other option is to purchase a nucleus hive, and these are far from being a perfect way for a new beekeeper to start out with a first colony.

So far this year I have been in eight or nine states teaching some aspect of bees and beekeeping. In those areas where package bees are commonly used, the complain level is high. Packages arrive with three inches of dead bees at the bottom and are replaced. Or the queen is dead. Or the queen dies at introduction. Or the queen lays one egg and the bees build a supercedure cell from that larva. On it goes. Five to six weeks after installation the colony swarms, even through it has not finished building one box of new foundation.

Apparently in 2009 we are have an excellent year for replenishing the bee trees and nesting cavities in the local environment regardless of the source of the colony: over-wintered, package hive or nucleus.

## The Bee Club's Role

Proactive bee clubs, and there are a number of them, offer intensive bee schools for training. Some are 'old school' and hold classes during the Winter for five to 10 weeks and ending when the newbees get their packages or nucleus hives. The quality of the instruction is all over the place, and there is an emphasis on mites, diseases and other 'bad stuff' in beekeeping that discourages many from ever getting started. This is not a good approach. You don't buy a product after spending a great deal of time learning about what will go wrong. And for new beekeepers the bad news factoids are meaningless until the beekeeper gets bees and



sees some of this for the first time.

Really cool clubs sponsor Mentor programs. The Mentors meet with individual and small groups to review what the colony should be doing at this time of year. Many of the sessions with mentors are not over a colony of bees, but held in a classroom. Field days are key to the success of a good Mentor program.

I see a real difference in the success of new beekeepers who work with Mentors. As a rule they have colonies working at the end of the season, and a higher success rate with over wintering. Of course there is a great deal of variation in the knowledge of those who serve as Mentors, but most clubs put in their most experienced and en-

thusiastic members to help newbees. These people are less likely to drop out of beekeeping if their colony dies, regardless of the reason.

### The Farm

In April I started teaching a 'Season Long Beekeeping Essentials' course at the family farm in Michigan. In setting up the program I made the following decisions:

a. The groups are small. There are a total of 15 students (one is a scholarship student), and they meet either on Thursday or Sunday afternoons. I approached this like a college course, with different sections. There were two groups of interested parties in regards to time of day: those who wanted to meet on the weekend, and another group who could NOT meet on the weekend (usually for work-related reasons). I can work with seven or eight beekeepers at a time because we open each person's hive one at a time. As many as ten students around a beehive is the limit, as side conversations develop and they miss the action inside the hive.

b. Each student MUST have his or her own beehive. One lady wanted to use one of my hives and I refused. Why? Because there is an enormous difference between managing someone else's hive and managing your own. Call this the rental car syndrome - a person is more careful with a hive of bees if they have assembled and painted the equipment (another requirement), installed a nucleus hive, and been mixing feed for several months. If they were work-

ing one of my hives, they might not be as invested in the process, just like you are not likely to be as fussy about that rental car as you would you with the four year old beast you are still making payments on.

c. All the student's hives are in one apiary. We set up the hives in my Dad's old orchard, complete with lots of autumn olive, honeysuckle, raspberries and poison ivy. Lots of poison ivy. So everyone wears real shoes and long pants to work bees or risks the danger of doing a lot of scratching.

In my opinion, this is where the magic happens. When you have a hive of bees in your backyard you have ZERO chance to compare it to another hive unless you started with two hives (some students have done two). But when you work your hive and then watch another beekeeper work his/hers you are forced to make comparisons between the buildup rate, the pattern of larvae the queen is laying, the presence or absence of disease and mites and lots more.

Most of us are competitive, and when we keep bees we want to know how our bees are doing. Unless we have a basis for comparison, we are working in a vacuum, and cannot know if our bees are doing exceptionally well or if they need help. By looking at other colonies, we get to see a range of performances. While the queens were, in general, very good, I think the students have now seen a wide range of issues that have arisen. One colony had extremely bad chalk brood. Another, the first to produce

surplus honey, was one of the first to swarm when the weather turned colder.

d. Arrangements were made to get sister queens in five-frame nucs. All the bees were supplied by a beekeeper who has hives in Indiana and Michigan and who has stock from the Purdue queen-breeding program operated by Dr. Greg Hunt and beekeeper Krispn Givens. The reason for this is clear: I really wanted to use a locally-adapted stock with some proven *Varroa* mite resistance. I knew these queens were open mated daughters, so the chance of a high degree of resistance was low. I expected to see some variation in the performance of the colonies because of the open mating. My students and I were all amazed at the extent of this difference.

The five frame nucs arrived 20 May, later than most instructors will tolerate for package bee installation. We have had a very cool and wet year, and buildup of these colonies was slow. As of late July I am still waiting for the weather to warm up. Earlier we had about five days of really warm weather while the basswood was in bloom, and some of the month old colonies produced a deep of honey, drawn from foundation, in those five days.

When the bees arrived we started feeding sugar syrup immediately, most often in plastic gallon bags or in top feeders. Feeding stopped with the short nectar flow.

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e. Frequency of classes. I scheduled seven or eight sessions from April to October. The first session was in the basement of the house to put equipment together. Each student worked to put one box and the frames together under supervision, and then took the remaining materials home to finish the project.

f. The last class meeting will be on moving bees. All the colonies will leave the farm and go to the beekeeper's home or, in some cases, a community garden sponsored by a local church to produce food locally.

In general sessions have all gone very well, and friendships and concern for the other person has developed, as well as some socializing after we work the bees. Snacks and beverages appear. It brings up images of "it takes a village" as a method of teaching beekeeping. I am the sole experienced beekeeper, and in the future I will try to bring in others to share their experiences with bees. There are relatively few people in an area like mine where potential instructors have both an academic and a real world beekeeping experience, so I will be selective on who adds further confusion to my student's minds.

My style is pretty low key when we work bees. I want each beekeeper to work his or her own hive. My job is to coach them through the comb removal and inspection. If I see them struggling with something I will try to model an easier way by taking

the hive tool or comb and suggesting "maybe this will be easier for you." It is frustrating for me to see people struggle with thick, clumsy gloves, but many of the students shed them during the first or second class session. For the glove wearers I have to develop compensating moves to help them work the colony without getting a bit frustrated with all the 'damn propolis'.

#### Full Access to Colonies

A brother lives at one end of the farm and has met all the class members. This provides a safe and secure means for all of them to check their colony at most any time without someone calling the sheriff. I like having people come and go to check their bees, and when I am there (or in a few cases I have met them to work on something), it really extends the teaching opportunity one on one or in a small group.

All of the students have each other's email addresses and some have shared what is happening with their colony when they made an individual visit. One woman was working her bees when another student's colony swarmed, and we had an impromptu class on hiving the swarm.

This is real world beekeeping. Swarms, chalk brood, queen replacement and other natural events happen. We have had lengthy discussions about the weather and how it impacts the hives. The key is to let as many of these students share in the experience as possible, and then to

discuss the events in one of the two small groups.

There has not been time in our three-hour sessions to do a formal classroom presentation. We fire up the smokers and go out to the bees for most of that interval, and end the time sitting at a picnic table to discuss what we have seen. That is my only organized time for instruction, since I can ask formal questions, usually along the line of 'what does that mean' or 'what is happening here?' We use Dewey Caron's big textbook (*Honey Bee Biology and Beekeeping*) and like any class some have read it cover to cover and others have not cracked the cover, and admit it. This not a graded course - I tell students that the bees determine the final grade.

So far we have not lost any hives, but we have seen supercedure and swarm cells and swarming. We have tried lots of ideas to help students and sometimes they help and usually they don't. Being unable to predict the weather we teeter on adding another super with more feeding.

Next month I will continue this discussion and make recommendations on how to start a site-based, season-long beekeeping essentials class in your area. **BC**

*Larry Connor owns and operates Wicwas Press - [www.wicwas.com](http://www.wicwas.com) and also runs an incredible mentor program for new beekeepers at his family farm in Michigan.*

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