

# The Fifth Year Beekeeper

Larry Connor

In October we discussed the expectations of what a beekeeper should know at the end of their first year. In November we reviewed standards for a beekeeper at the end of their third year of beekeeping. In this month's article we will review the 'state of the art' of beekeeping of fifth year beekeepers, and keeping in line with the Interview format of this month's issue, I have cast out a small net for people who filled that qualification and were willing to complete an email questionnaire I developed.

Why five years? In addition to allowing me to make two year progressions from one to three to five, many of the regional and state Master Beekeeper testing programs draw a line at five years as the minimum for beekeeper experience and proficiency to start the exam process. One expects that the exam identifies the best of the best, but what are some of the answers the entire group can answer? Generally when I think of a fifth year beekeeper I have an image of someone who is able to coordinate a level of competence and outreach so that other people view these individuals as role models, mentors, teachers and suppliers of bees and beekeeping equipment. At the five year mark we expect that they will move forward into more subtle areas of keeping bees, perhaps becoming county bee inspectors, teaching beekeeping classes, public outreach or providing queens and nuclei hives for sale.

My first observation was that many beekeepers at end of the fifth year of beekeeping really don't remember anymore when they started with beekeeping unless someone tells them when it was or they have had it broken up into sections. In a way that is a positive development, since they have been keeping bees long enough they are no longer counting the days and months that they have kept bees. It also means that they have seen five seasons of bees and different weather conditions.

Not unexpectedly, the second observation was that these Year Five Grads are a remarkably diverse group of beekeepers, a full assortment of successes and failures, and a wide range of interests with plenty of room to grow in the art and science of bee husbandry.



Erin Willett

Erin Willett was terrified the first night of her bee school, then living in Worcester County Massachusetts. She explains that the bee club there was a powerful influence on her beekeeping skills – "Worcester County Beekeeping Association, the oldest beekeeping club in the U.S., was instrumental in giving me my start. They are passionate about research and learning, bring world class speakers in for their meetings. Whenever I needed help, all I needed to do was call and beekeepers were there to answer questions and help."

In that group she had a bee mentor, Dr. Lee Denike "who guided me through my first three years of beekeeping, discussed differences of opinion on medicating bees, and never said, "I told you so," however much I may have deserved it at times."

She started with two colonies – "This enabled me to spot trouble earlier. For example, I started with two packages – one settled down right away, the other acted like rowdy teenagers, they immediately superseded their queen. I would not have recognized the trouble without the side-by-side comparison".

Her first 12 months were filled with challenges, mostly due to the weather. She says that at first it was "too wet, then too dry, then too wet. The bees were ripping out their honey stores during the dearth and that slowed down their drawing out comb in the top super. I didn't recognize it as quickly as I should have, otherwise I would have continued feeding them during the dearth, but I mistakenly thought they were well on their way."

In spite of this she kept both of her hives alive through the winter. "At the 12 month mark, I finally felt like a "real" beekeeper. It's one thing to read about it, but once I tended the bees for a full year and experienced their seasonal rhythms, my understanding of beekeeping became much more comprehensive."

As she progressed in her beekeeping she says her greatest success has been to learn to catch swarms and to do cut-outs. She adds that "I don't mind losing a hive as I can learn from it. It is so frustrating when bees die and there is no obvious evidence of disease."

Her other areas of success are her ability to manage thriving colonies without using chemicals, and having fun educating the public about honey bees and beekeeping. She enjoys teaching chemical-free beekeeping along with the important role that honey bees play in the food supply. She especially likes "extracting honey from chemical free hives."

Frustrations still abound at the five year mark. She shares many beekeepers frustrations about changing seasons and different blooming times of major bee plants. She dislikes the fact that pesticides are everywhere: "Working hard to keep my bees alive and seeing the heavy use of both agricultural and lawn pesticides by people unaware of the consequences."

One of the biggest surprises she has had was how much management and manipulation she needs to do during the winter months – "(I) wouldn't have dreamed of this five years ago but now, winter hive manipulation/management is necessary to keep them alive."

What is left for her? Well, she does not feel that she does a good job of making increase colonies. "I suck at hive splits . . . I really want to get good at doing splits. I feel like it's a 50/50 gamble every time I do one, no matter what method I use, very frustrating."

Erin is now a part of the Medina County Beekeepers Association in Ohio. Her farm is the Smaht Fahm, best said in a solid eastern MA accent. In her five years of beekeeping she has learned a lot since she "dumped my first package into a hive."

In the course of getting to know Joe and Nancy Calme at a church I was attending, I learned that they were both interested in learning about bees and keeping hives on property they had purchased and planned to build a barn and a house during their retirement. Soon after I had relocated from Connecticut to Michigan I offered an intensive class at my family farm where each student was required to buy bee equipment and a nucleus, and keep it on the Connor Farm from installation to October, when they would move the bees to their permanent home. This class gave each student the opportunity to see the vast variation in behavior and buildup these so-called "identical" nucleus hives demonstrated. While some students had hives so riddled with chalk brood that they failed to survive the first year, Joe and Nancy had colonies were very successful. Both Nancy and Joe set up one hive each. Here is Joe's description of what happened that first year:

"The nucs were successfully installed, flourished, filled two deeps and one honey super (the first season). We were able to create a split towards the end of the session. We successfully transferred the hives to our own property. Most importantly, both hives made it through their first winter."

Joe does much of the bee work now, but Nancy is with him to help with the smoker, and of course to ask really great questions. As their mentor, and personal friend, for these years, they use a combination of asking for permission or asking for forgiveness in their bee management. They have supported the idea of using locally-reared and mated queens and have let their splits make their own queens. They share their knowledge with friends from work, with fellow church members (everyone wearing a veil), running the extractor, and even teaching beekeeping at Western Michigan University's Life-Long Learning Academy.

Joe successfully served as a board member for the Kalamazoo Bee Club, where he was encouraged to phone me to ask about possible speakers and ideas for club projects.

They now keep four colonies on the farm, and the barn and house are now finished. They have a farm pond where Nancy likes to fish. The pond provides water for the colonies. This past season they harvested 17 gallons of honey, much of which they share with family and friends, although Joe is now interested in learning about making mead, and I look forward to a gift bottle in the future.

Their successes include hosting honey harvesting parties at their farm and sharing the bees and beekeeping practices with non beekeepers. They also take pride in the fact that they have learned to install virgin queens in hives that have swarmed, as well as in nuclei they have made.

They are still frustrated about how difficult it is to light a smoker and keep it going, especially Nancy. They

have small hive beetles, as do most beekeepers in MI, but they have not lost a colony from them, yet.

Swarming is their biggest issue. They say that they have trouble "Identifying the signs of impending swarms, taking action to prevent swarms and taking advantage by making increase colonies (when these conditions appear)."

Of the many students I have worked with over the years, Joe and Nancy have been quite successful. While it would be nice to take credit for that, I cannot and refuse to when they freely drop the name of Dr. Larry Connor as the source of their support and guidance. The truth is that they have been nearly ideal students, participating fully and paying attention to what various speakers say, and asking questions if they fail to fully understand. Add to this the fact that they have been loyal participants of the Kalamazoo Bee Club and also subscribe to this magazine, more or less at my insistence. Every March they travel to East Lansing to Michigan State University (we all graduated from MSU), for the annual Michigan Beekeepers Association Agriculture and Natural Resources week meeting at Kellogg Center, where invited national and international speakers and a vast array of workshops provide the breath and depth of knowledge they benefit from as they grow in their beekeeping passion.

Royceann Mather keeps bees in a suburb of Kansas City, KS. She has not had the same level of success as the first two interviewees, and we can give some of the credit for that to some remarkably poor beekeeping conditions in the western Kansas area over her five years of beekeeping. Her list of greatest frustrations and failures looks like this:

"Bees dying every year but one.  
Hive bodies too heavy to lift  
Bees dying  
Can't keep smoker going  
Too many things to do and remember (add second hive body when 1st \_\_% full, add supers when?)  
Can't find the queen  
Wax moths taking over a hive in Fall  
Bees dying."

There is nothing as frustrating as when bees die, and it is not always the beekeeper's fault. Royceann began keeping bees after taking a class at a community college on beekeeping, starting with two colonies.

Both died over the first Winter.

She still has two colonies, and continues to be frustrated by keeping a variety of challenges under control, including "mites, hive beetles, nosema, active queen finding, feeding and entrance reducers."

She admits that she is "not being relaxed enough to take time when inspecting to notice conditions of hives." In the future she wants to perfect queen finding. "After five years, I really should be able to find my queens."

And "keep the smoker going."

It is not all bad news. She has had the support of Robert Hughes, teacher of her beekeeping class. "if it weren't for him I would have quit after two years."

And one year her bees made 170 pounds of surplus honey. Her greatest success was passing out honey to friends after this honey was harvested. **BC**

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