

# The Settled Beekeeper

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## Networker, Mentor, Teacher, Traveler

What are characteristics of a beekeeper who has settled into his or her operation, and finds considerable comfort with both the challenges and successes of keeping bees? It may take some time – years – for a beekeeper to feel settled and find peace with the bees and beekeeping activities. During the last three months of 2013 we looked at the suggested levels of proficiency of first, third and fifth year beekeepers. Now we will look at the characteristics of the well-established beekeeper, one with any numbers of years of experience.

### Control

Certainly the established beekeeper has a greater sense of being in control of their bees. We all have worries and doubts about our bees making it through the pollination season, surviving the spring dearth, not swarming out, being lost to miticides, experiencing queen failure, being robbed by other colonies and being alive in the Spring. What each of these concerns involves is the need to be able to control each component.

If bees are being trucked to California for almond pollination, or moved across the state for apple pollination, either a beekeeper must make the commitment to be there for the bees or find only the most trustworthy person they can to manage the hives, and to make sure the bees return in good health and the beekeeper a fair share of the pollination fees. Moving bees to any area involve multiple risks. Minimizing the impact of these risks is a key requirement of the beekeeper who controls their bee operation.

This may involve an intensive feeding program both before and after the first pollination event of the season. Rigorous feeding seems to be the trend and necessary fate of the sustainable beekeeper – not letting the colonies languish and die from poor nutrition. Quality food fed during the buildup season will help maintain bee populations as well as ensure essential food reserves for future breaks in natural food supplies. It is not unusual to have a break in nectar and pollen production in areas where there may have been an excellent early Spring nectar flow from willows and early maples, and then fruit bloom a few weeks later. In

some years the blooms may overlap, but in other seasons there may be days if not weeks between the two blooming cycles. The beekeeper who is in control has kept excellent records about these matters and constantly checks for the status and abundance of each plant source the bees are expected to visit for both pollen and nectar. Then they feed if needed to prevent nutritional stress of their rapidly developing colonies.

Swarming is the topic of my latest book publication, written by Steve Repasky with my help (*Swarm Essentials*, 2014. Wicwas Press). There is no easy method for swarm prevention and control for many bee hives, although this book deals extensively with various methods being used for control by different beekeepers. Three popular methods are:

- Make new colonies from strong overwintered hives, reducing the population of bees BEFORE swarm cells appear in the hive.
- Cage the queen as the swarm season is about to launch, leaving the queen in the cage for two or three weeks so the population growth of the hive is slowed, the congestion of the hive is reduced,

and the bees have a break in the mite cycle.

- Raise brood above a double screen and provide the bees with a new queen. When the main nectar flow begins, the double screen is removed and either the old queen is removed or the beekeeper lets the two ladies fight it out.

Recent work shows that miticides used by beekeepers kill sperm in drones. This fact should have everyone's attention, so that we all have a clear plan to make sure we have:

- Abundant drone production
- No use of sterilizing miticidal agents that kill sperm in drones
- A rigorous feeding plan to keep drone production at a high level throughout the queen mating period in your area. This is not always easy for many hives shut down drone production in mid Summer only to start up again in the late Summer and early Fall.

Queen failure is undoubtedly related to the issue of poor semen viability. If a young, well-reared queen does not find adequate numbers of drones containing viable



Larry filling the role of teacher and mentor in the beeyard.



sperm, she will start laying at least some drone eggs, and the percentage of worker sized drone production will increase over time. This fact upsets the balance of the hive and initiates early supersedure. Then that replacement queen also faces difficulties of poor mating success as well as heavy predation by birds, dragonflies and loss through disorientation. We cannot overlook the impact of various viruses and diseases and their degradation of queen health and performance. Queen failure is a major part of colony failure and as a beekeeping community we do not appreciate all the ways this can happen, and how it lowers our beekeeping success.

Much robbing takes place in our apiaries every year, as one colony robs out another, and a third hive robs out the first. This generates unnecessary and unnatural stress on the hive (single hives in the wild are probably rarely robbed out until the colony has died). Many colonies are robbed by other Hymenoptera – hornets, wasps and yellowjackets. It is hard to control the production of these pests, but evidence shows that these species forage quite locally, so a search for local social insect colonies, and their careful elimination, may reduce the number of wasps at every crack and opening of the hive from August to November, when these species reach maximum population.

Winter losses continue to plague beekeepers in many areas. This is partially related to *Varroa* mite predation, virus population buildup, and low levels of winter stores. Leaving honey for the bees (and keeping the robbers out), as well as providing adequate protection from the wind,

upper ventilation, top insulation and top feeding with candy boards all reduce losses. Your goal should be to lose no more than ten percent of your overwintered colonies. This number can be influenced by taking losses in the Fall and not trying to Winter tiny colonies or those filled with old bees.

#### Paperwork

Is there a benefit to good record keeping? Successful beekeepers seem to agree this is true, but they may not agree on the width and depth of this level of detail. Let's start with the obvious:

1. Does someone know where your bees and bee equipment are located? Bee inspectors tell of 'found' abandoned beeyards, their location not known by the family of the beekeeper. Perhaps you should keep a list, with photos of the site and directions and GPS maps to each apiary. Update this two or three times a year. This is good animal husbandry – not letting bees die unattended and perhaps spreading disease. If you are a solo beekeeper, make sure someone is ready to help out in an emergency.
2. After you have invested in the bees and sold some of their products produced in the hives, your beekeeping status should become a business activity. If you generate income from your bees and run your beekeeping in a business-like manner you should formally form a business. You are the person who decides that your beekeeping hobby, or habit, is now a business. Financial records, sales and other tax payments, and

a good set of books are essential to any business. Take a Winter class in business record keeping to learn what you records you should keep and what you can let slide a bit. Many beekeepers use Quicken or Quickbooks for their records, invoicing and bill payment. This will probably mean that you need to start a separate checking (and hopefully savings) account for the bee funds. If you have a family farm, you probably already have the mechanism in place to add beekeeping to your farming business.

3. Plan to make a profit from your bees. I am always encouraged to see young beekeepers reinvesting the money they made from honey and hive product sales, pollination fees, and other income back into their business rather than borrow money. It is terrifying to hear of beekeepers who use a credit card to expand their bee operation. Pay off your outstanding debt and stay that way. Expand within your means. Even in a small-scale operation, put some of the income from the bees aside for yourself as a savings cushion, and some aside for the bees.
4. Consider individual proprietorships, partnerships, limited liability companies and corporations – each type need to be carefully examined with you by some professionals who know you and your beekeeping business.
5. Get insurance on your bee business if you cannot afford to write a check for the amount you have invested in your business as a replacement after a flood or fire. Some homeowner policies offer limited coverage, or check



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- out some of the firms that sell agricultural insurance at state and national meetings.
6. Set goals and have a plan to reach them. Do not be afraid of growing your business, but develop the tools to do this by researching new methods and procedures you will need in your hive manipulations, new product development and perhaps as a speaker talking about bees and beekeeping to the general public or bee clubs.
  7. Develop an 'exit' strategy. What happens if you get sick and cannot work your bees? Who will do the work? And pay you back on your investment? I have heard many stories by beekeepers who have had major health issues a few days before their packages or nucs are set to arrive. Develop what I call the Mack Truck Plan – what happens if you are run over by a Mack Truck! You will need to have someone who knows your business well enough to step in to keep the bees from dying and maintain any contracts you are obligated to fill. Don't become that dead beekeeper whose family lost all the bees to disease, and all the equipment was burned. Have a plan to turn over your bees to someone who understands what to do, and will do it.
  8. Use contracts. Use them for pollination agreements, sales areas, employment of contract labor – you will develop your own items to add to this list.

#### Have Fun

**Network.** Beekeeping involves a wonderfully social community, and the most successful beekeepers are those that work together to get the

job done each season. The sharing experience many beekeepers find from other beekeepers will stimulate you to try new things and increase your depth in many subjects. Set a time once a month that you and other beekeepers in your immediate area get together for coffee or something stronger (test that new mead recipe) and socialize.

**Mentor.** Volunteer to take on a teenager or retiree as your student. Don't be afraid, as it can be a lot of fun. If you are in a bee club that sponsors mentor training sessions, make sure to attend so you learn how to teach new beekeepers – one or many – to start their hives. Teach them how to assemble equipment correctly, install nuclei properly, and harvest honey efficiently. Some of this you will do for free, and some of this you should include in a fee for training, equipment and bees. Develop a simple one page agreement or contract for any mentoring arrangement.

**Teach.** Every bee club worth it's organizational effort should be sponsoring one or more beekeeping classes every year. These classes may be simple one day events that introduce beekeeping to non beekeepers, or they may be two or three year programs that run eight or more weeks per season that get into the details of Beekeeping 101, 102 and 103. There are books for that. Develop a series of talks on topics you know and enjoy, and don't be afraid to charge \$100 per hour for your time as an instructor. When you add in all the time you took to develop the talk, you might earn the equivalent of average wage in China. If you need to drive or fly to a meeting ask that all expenses

be covered.

**Travel.** Dr. Roger Morse at Cornell University once arranged bus tours for commercial beekeepers. I don't know of anyone who does that anymore. He brought a group to visit Ohio beekeepers in the 1970s and we went to a series of commercial beekeeping operations to visit along with some fine country restaurants to swarm into. Morse said to me "Most (commercial beekeepers) will walk into another beekeeping operation and learn what they want in about ten minutes." Sometimes they went home and adapted a new idea. Or they returned saying "I hope I am never that bad a beekeeper."

Many small-scale and sideline beekeepers need to travel to beekeeping meetings outside their usual comfort zone. Most beekeepers will benefit from the National meetings (but there is no Sideline program at ABF this year), but some of the other state and provincial meetings might be even more interesting. I have had great visits to British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario beekeeping groups, and I highly recommend that more U.S. beekeepers travel to these meetings and share the wealth of knowledge these events offer. Take some time to visit while going to and from the meeting if you drive, or rent a car and plan some visits to see other beekeeping operations.

Enjoy your bees! **BC**

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