

The Benefits of Bees

By Greg Lilly, Editor



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

Don Cole mentioned to his wife, Allison, that he thought he might raise a few chickens. With the skill of a diplomat, she talked about the endangerment of the honey bee from colony collapse disorder, recently in the news, and how important they are to the pollination of plants.

“It was her idea to look into bees,” Don confirms. “She’s from New York City, grew up

in Manhattan. So it wasn’t like she’d been a beekeeper before, but she didn’t want chickens.”

Don grew up in rural upstate New York, in the town of Clarence, just northeast of Buffalo. “I worked on a farm as a kid. That farm had chickens.”

The idea of bees intrigued Don, so he began to research them and soon took the plunge.

He admits he didn’t have much of a fear of bees. “I never really worried about being stung. When I work my bees, I just wear a head veil with my regular summertime shorts and t-shirt. I started working with the bees without gloves because I could learn how to manipulate the hive and get a feel of it without the personal protective equipment on.” He says that with all the protective gear, like



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leather gloves, the beekeeper isn't as close to the bees, plus it's harder to be gentle with them through bulky material.

"You will get stung and I do get stung. You get used to it. There's less reaction if you are stung a couple of times as the summer goes along. I've only been stung once this summer." He stresses, "Honey bees are defensive, not aggressive."

The experience one beekeeper has with one hive isn't indicative of what he or she will have with the next hive. "Bees have a temperament," Don explains. "Different hives have different temperaments, and that is influenced by the weather and time of year." The availability of food sources will affect how the bees behave. A time of year when plants and trees aren't flowering as much, like July and August (a time called nectar dearth), the bees get more protective of their store of food in the hive.

"On cloudy days, I can see their reaction as I come close to the hive; they're protective. Sunny days, when there is plenty of nectar, they're busy and more relaxed."

Don typically uses a smoker to quiet the

bees. "There are different theories on why smoke calms bees. Some say it disrupts their communication." At the entrance to the hive, there are guard bees. These bees will alert the others if an intruder (for example, other insects) tries to get into the hive to rob them. "With the smoke, the bees will settle down into the lower frames so you can work them."

For potential beekeepers, Don suggests starting in the winter to order bees. "A lot of people think about it in the spring. By that time, it's too late to get bees. Bees can be acquired in three basic ways: a nucleus colony, which is a small honey bee hive; package bees, which are bees from a large hive shaken into a package and a queen is added along with a food source for shipment." Don explains that he doesn't use a shipping company when he gets package bees, but drives to Georgia to pick them up. "Thirdly, you can get bees by capturing a swarm, that's when a hive gets too big and part of them leave with the queen. You see these in trees or buildings." Don is the person to call to relocate a swarm or hive that isn't in an ideal place.

Last year, Don and his daughter, Abigail, relocated a swarm that had taken to a tree in New Town. "Everyone was fascinated as they watched, until I announced we were going to shake the limb to get the swarm into a container. The spectators scattered for cover."

Beekeepers make arrangements for acquiring bees in the winter. "December or January is the usual time to place the order for bees," he says.

He suggests starting with two hives. "You can lose a hive. A hive could leave for some reason or a disease could kill out the hive. With two, if you lose one, you still have one, plus you can compare the health of the hives against each other."


Bees aren't territorial, so the hives can be placed side by side. "They are territorial in that a bee from a different hive cannot come into the neighboring hive," he says. "In July and August, during the nectar dearth, if you have a hive, that for some reason, the population is down then another hive may rob all the food sources. The robbed hive would starve."

A package to start a hive comes with about

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10,000 bees. The population of the hive will decline and grow with the seasons. "At the height of summer, a large hive will have 60,000 bees. After summer, the bees prepare themselves for over-wintering. The population declines. The male bees are kicked out in November. Their one purpose is finished: to mate with a queen." The males don't help around the hive: they don't clean the hive, feed the queen or gather anything for the hive. "They don't even sting," Don adds. "In the winter, I see the female worker bees dragging the drones (males) out of the hive. They don't let them back in."

In winter, the queen stops laying eggs and the bees cluster around her keeping her warm. As the days get longer and the temperature rises, the queen starts laying eggs again.

"A bee is born, and inside the hive, it is a housekeeper cleaning, storing food, taking care of the queen," Don describes. "After a certain time, it leaves the hive as a forager – gathering nectar and pollen."

Besides witnessing the fascinating community of the hive, Don reaps other benefits from

the bees. "The honey I harvest is the surplus honey of the hive. Also a beekeeper can raise bees to sell to other beekeepers. The wax can be used for candles, and some people make other products like lip balm. Also there is propolis." The bees seal gaps in the hive with propolis made from sap or other botanical sources. "Some people will eat the propolis for medicinal purposes," Don says. "And there's royal jelly, this is part of the lifecycle of the bees. If the hive needs to raise a new queen, they feed the larvae royal jelly. A bee population is about 90 percent female. If the queen isn't producing or is injured, the workers (female bees) will feed royal jelly to one of the larvae for a longer period of time to create the new queen. Some people will harvest that and sell it. That's labor intensive. I don't do that."

Don's hobby of beekeeping allows him to see individuals working for the benefit of the whole community. "They're fascinating. They are like a microcosm of a company or a neighborhood or a city. Each bee makes up the whole. They each have their own job for the good of the hive. It's not about one individual,

but about the survival of the colony."

Don and Allison's three children have shown some interest in the bees, but Don says they're too busy to take up the hobby. "Alexandria, our oldest, graduated from Longwood with a history degree and is going back for Library Science. Abigail is at UVa, entering her last year in biochemistry. Our son, Drake, is at Christopher Newport for electrical engineering and is entering his sophomore year this fall."

Williamsburg has a growing beekeeping community. "The Williamsburg Beekeepers Association meets once a month. It's a group of folks sharing a common interest of honey bees: challenges, best practices, resources," Don lists.

"Working the bees is very therapeutic and relaxing for me," Don Cole says. "It takes time. Just checking the hives takes about an hour for each: smoke them, open them, check the frames and check the brood pattern of the queen. The end goal is to really enjoy it as a hobby and to host bees for the benefit of the ecosystem." NDN



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