

Food & Nutrition:

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The latest buzz

Urban beekeeping is swelling

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RALEIGH - On a recent Wednesday afternoon, Elka Harabin, 54, dons her beekeeper's helmet and veil before checking on one of her honeybee hives nestled in a friend's backyard.

The hive lives on Swain Street, a mere seven blocks east of Fayetteville Street, downtown Raleigh's main drag. Her other beehive is about the same distance west of downtown in her own yard in Boylan Heights. Harabin is among a growing number of people in North Carolina taking up beekeeping as a hobby, many in urban settings.

"North Carolina is a real hotbed of hobby beekeepers," says Gregory Clements, president of the N.C. Beekeepers Association, the nation's largest with almost 2,000 members.

This upswing in hobby beekeeping is what David Tarpy, an assistant professor at N.C. State University, calls the "silver lining" on colony collapse disorder, the mysterious disease killing off bee colonies worldwide. CCD's cause is unknown. In recent years, commercial beekeepers who truck their bees from farm to farm to pollinate crops have discovered their hives decimated. News reports have spread the word about the mystifying affliction that breaks down honeybees' immune systems.

So why should we care about the health of honeybees? Honeybees account for a third of every bite of food that we eat, says Bruce Wolk, a spokesman for the National Honey Board.

That glass of orange juice you drank with breakfast likely would not be possible without honeybees. "You are hard pressed to find orange growers who don't move bees into their orange groves every year," Wolk says.

Or look at food sources indirectly linked to the honeybee, like dairy products. Dairy cows eat alfalfa, which is one of the primary crops pollinated by honeybees.

Cornell University estimates the value of honeybee pollination for American agriculture is \$14.6 billion annually.

Beekeeping has become so popular in recent years that several county beekeeping associations have had to turn people away from their annual beekeeping schools. For example, the Buncombe County Beekeepers Association had more than 400 people apply for its school in January -- many likely lured by the 20 hives being given away. But Janet Shisler, the association's president, says the facility for their school could seat only 310, so more than 100 people were put on a waiting list.

Those who sell beekeeping equipment can barely keep smokers and protective clothing in stock.



Beekeeper Elka Harabin uses smoke to calm the bees before opening their box to feed the hive seven pounds of sugar dissolved in water.

STAFF PHOTOS BY ROBERT WILLETT

"There is a tremendous increase in the sale of beekeeping equipment. It's just staggering," says Steve Forrest, owner of the Brushy Mountain Bee Farm in Moravian Falls.

"A lot of people are more interested in bees because of colony collapse disorder and the realization that their food doesn't just come from the grocery store," said Amie Newsome, an extension agent who helped set up the Johnston County Beekeepers Association two years ago.

The bridge

In the Triangle, where farmers markets thrive and "eat local" is a mantra, a healthy honeybee population is key. "Without bees, you don't have local food," says Tarpy, the N.C. State extension apiculturist.

Tarpy adds that the hives managed by hobby beekeepers have been less affected by CCD than commercial beekeepers' hives. As a result, hobby beekeepers are trying to preserve the bee population and help farmers.

"We're going to be the bridge until they figure out what's going on," says Harabin, the Boylan Heights beekeeper.

So don't be surprised if a bee box shows up in your neighbor's yard. Or two. Or three.

Or 19, if you live near Danny Jaynes, and his wife, Mary, in the Landingham subdivision in Willow Spring. Jaynes, president of the Wake County Beekeepers Association, and his wife have about 2.5 million bees among their hives here and 30-plus hives from Lexington to Old Fort. They harvest between 1,000 and 1,500 pounds of honey a year. The Jaynes have been beekeepers since 2000, picking up a hobby that Mary Jaynes grew up with because her father had beehives.

The Jayneses sell their Queen Mary's honey products at the Holly Springs farmers market every third Saturday.

On one of the other Saturdays, Shannon Hughes, 35, and two of his children sell their honey. Hughes, a software engineer at Red Hat, started out with two hives last year at his Fuquay-Varina home. Now they have between 20 and 30 hives at their home and at a nearby farm. His children, ages 4 and 6, help with the beekeeping tasks. "They have their own bee suits," he says.

Any profit they make from their beekeeping and honey sales goes toward the family's vacation, which they finally got to take advantage of earlier this month. The family went to Disney World.

A few tips

If you would like to take up urban beekeeping, Harabin, Hughes and Jaynes offer some advice:

- The hives need to be located so the bees have a flight path that doesn't cross where people walk.
- The bees need a water source, or else they will be hovering around your neighbors' swimming pools.
- Educate your neighbors about honeybees to quell their fears about being stung.

Hughes adds one other tip: "After the harvest, we usually give out some honey to the neighbors."

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