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WHY HONEYBEES?

by Grai St. Clair Rice

Co-Founder, HoneybeeLives, Organic Beekeeper, Author, and Photographer

Imagine opening a hive of honeybees, as if gently opening a beating heart full of sweetness and life. All your senses focus on the now of hearing, feeling, seeing, smelling and awe for this gift of nature. Tending honeybees in a gentle, educated manner takes us out of the rush of our busy lives and into a state of focusing on nurturing.

There is a long history of human civilization with honeybees. Stretching from early honey hunters, to the dawn of agriculture in Babylon and Egypt, to evocative religious symbolism across many cultures, and now to our contemporary dependence on honeybees for commercial pollination.

Today, the vast movement of migratory beekeepers trucking billions of honeybees around the country to meet an intense demand for pollination is completely unnatural. Massive tracks of agricultural lands are in mono-crop production mode with honeybees as the abused lifeline.

When honeybee colony losses hit mainstream media just over a decade ago, it was the economic impact of rising

food prices that set the alarms off and brought concern for honeybee health into the public eye. Subsequent funding for research has developed new in-depth knowledge about the remarkable honeybee, although agribusiness practices of pesticide and fungicide use is unlikely to change easily. Commercial hive management has improved to some degree since then, although massive colony losses are still chronic and devastating, especially after the almond pollination that takes place every February in California. News of these losses rarely make it to mainstream media anymore, as if it is all taken in stride.

The true value of the public consciousness that has emerged from this crisis is a burgeoning trend in backyard beekeeping. People are drawn to honeybees for myriad reasons, including being inspired with a greater sense of responsibility and connection to nature. Even people who do not wish to be beekeepers can still learn and support pollinators with their landscape choices, and how they chose to spend their money.

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LEFT: Chris Harp shows the extended frames HoneybeeLives uses for the brood box (where the baby bees are) at a watershed festival. **RIGHT:** Chris Harp teaching a small "hands-on" class at the HoneybeeLives Apiary in New Paltz, New York. © Grai St. Clair Rice / HoneybeeLives

The true joy is the experience of beekeeping itself since it stirs the intellect and the spirit. It can feel like a journey that changes every year, offering side trips into biology and botany, and can engage carpentry and problem solving skills along the way. The guides and teachers one chooses makes a difference in the approach taken to honeybee care. Tending honeybees for the good of the bee - not the ease of the beekeeper - and learning to respect their instincts and their beautiful, complex society will set the journey on a path of deep discovery. If you take the time to listen to the bees, they will be your best teachers.

A moveable-frame hive was patented by Rev Lorenzo Langstroth in 1852. This style of hive has become the standard in the United States. It allows for the removal and inspection of frames from within a hive, both for tending honeybee health and for harvesting their extra honey for human consumption. This invention allowed an intimacy with honeybees not previously possible.

Looking into the body of the hive transformed the experience of beekeeping into one that allows our intimate care to inform our knowledge of the rhythm and lifecycles of the colony. A honeybee colony is a vibrant super-organism with each bee working for the good of the whole. It turns out that these tiny insects can feed our bodies, our souls, and our imaginations, as well as engage an altruistic appreciation of community.

When our beekeeping students ask me how much work it takes to be a beekeeper, I respond: "If it feels like work, you shouldn't do it." The rewards far exceed the tasks required. It comes as no surprise that there is a formidable list of beekeepers among civilization's greatest thinkers.

Beekeeping is not brain surgery, however the golden days of beekeeping are behind us and tending hives requires more vigilance than in the past. The reality is that diseases and pests spread rapidly with migratory beekeeping, and loss of available forage has had a negative impact on honeybee nutrition, and pollinators in general. The need to monitor and inspect honeybee health is an integral part of individual hive management, and properly educated beekeepers are vital to the overall health of honeybees.

In February 2015, a new style of hive was introduced thru a crowd-sourced Indiegogo campaign. The Flow-Hive campaign quickly reached over \$4 Million, and had people from every walk of life talking about this intriguing hive. The premise is that honey can be dispensed from the hive by turning a crank on the outside, which separates honeycomb on the inside, so that honey flows into jars without disturbing the bees. Hmmmmmmm.....

The popularity of this hive as been met with deep concerns within the beekeeping community. On an instinctual, holistic level, it is heart wrenching to see a hive of honeybees turned into a dispenser of honey. Their lives and value are far greater than this arrangement merits. On a practical level, if bee-havers don't have enough education or interest to properly tend their honeybees, then eventual hive deaths can threaten the larger community of honeybees and beekeepers with potentially deadly, unchecked bee diseases.

A deep connection to nature and landscape had a powerful impact on the founding of our country, as discussed in the 2011 book "Founding Gardeners" by Andrea Wulf. Our first four presidents drew inspiration from the American

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landscape and the gardens they tended, which is reflected in their visions for a democratic society. The act of beekeeping takes us a step further towards embracing these ideals and the values we hold dear, and gives us pause to consider what our individual role will be in the future of nurturing the nature surrounding us.

Reverence has a way of elevating our daily experience. A honeybee makes 1/12 of a teaspoon of honey in her short lifetime. This honey is stored in the hive for use by her sisters to survive the following winter. In the process of collecting nectar, to be made into honey, she also collects and disperses pollen transferring this vital life force which transforms a flower into seeds for the future, often by way of a fruit or vegetable, which acts as the womb for the seeds.

Honeybees are considered the best pollinators in that they are single-source foragers and remain faithful to one kind of flower per trip, and sometimes even per day. Honeybees are one of the myriad species of pollinators that keep evolution ticking forward on our fecund planet. Without pollinators we would devolve, yet most of us pay little attention to the tiny insects that grace our lives. When you see a honeybee on a flower she is at the end of her life, since foraging is her final task.

As humans, what we do in our daily lives impacts the world around us, and in turn the future health of our earth. We needn't be overwhelmed with this as if it is a burden, instead find the joy in nurturing our planet through planting good forage for pollinators and watching them work the flowers outside your window, understanding also that many lawn care products may be detrimental to beneficial insects of all sorts. Supporting small farms and local beekeepers is also a piece of the puzzle for environmental health, as is choosing organic-biodegradable household products and taking responsibility for your own actions.

If you do choose to become a beekeeper choosing a reverential approach to their care will enrich your life beyond measure.

The gift of the honeybees is a gift of life!

ABOUT HoneybeeLives

Chris Harp and Grai St. Clair Rice co-founded HoneybeeLives in 2005 to provide educational experiences and apiary services in the NY / CT / NJ area. ***HoneybeeLives teaches two-day winter weekend classes in Natural / Organic beekeeping with a Biodynamic influence in the Hudson Valley and in Brooklyn, and hands-on seasonal classes in the HoneybeeLives Apiary.*** They also give presentations to beekeepers, retirement communities, garden clubs, schools and the general public to raise the awareness of the lives of honeybees and how each of us can help them thrive through conscious choices. www.honeybeelives.org



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TOP: Queen bee with nectar and pollen. **BOTTOM:** Swarm of bees hanging while they scout for a new home.



© Matt Petricone, Photographer

ABOUT Grai St. Clair Rice

A native of New York City, Grai loves the balance of city and country, and delights in nature within urban environments. Her love of honeybees and all the lessons they can teach us is something she shares with others through teaching, writing and photography. She lectures on gardening for honeybees and the unique aspects of honeybees for Beekeepers and the general public. She is currently developing presentations for schools and colleges, and working on two different books.

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