

Poughkeepsie Journal: My Valley

Raising honeybees helps protect local food supply

By Marji Yablon
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Several years ago, Mark Phillips of Hyde Park noticed that hardly any honeybees were visiting the fruit trees on his property, even though he remembered seeing huge numbers of them around such trees in years past. That spurred him to research the matter online and eventually to order bees and a wooden, stackable hive.

"I've seen the amount of fruit increase four-fold," he said of the peach, pear, apple and plum trees at his home and the cherry, apple and plum trees he grows at a vacation cabin further upstate.

The widespread decline of the honeybee is a matter of concern to those who appreciate its value to our food supply. Without a honeybee's transport of pollen from one plant to another, vegetables, fruits and nuts cannot grow.

The disappearance of managed pollinators — those bought or leased to pollinate crops — was first reported in 2006, in a study by the National Research Council. Since then, an annual census by the Apiary Inspectors of America has confirmed that about 30 percent of managed bees die each year.

An increasing number of mid-Hudson residents have decided to help counter this trend by setting up hives on their property. With a few hundred dollars and some research, more people are becoming backyard beekeepers, since it's easy to get a hive and several thousand bees by mail.

Salt Point resident Terri Totten, director of creative services for the Culinary Institute of America, became interested in beekeeping in 2009 through a cousin.

"He really opened my eyes," Totten recalled. Until then, she said, "I didn't know about the decline in the honeybee population."

In 2010, "he said he was going to split his hive and asked if I'd like to keep bees — that he'd give me the split. That is how and when I started. I didn't know a thing about beekeeping, so from March, when we had the discussion, to May, when I received my bees ... I read everything I could get my hands on."

Now she says, "my neighbors are very enthusiastic about my hives. They're interested," including those with young children.

As a hobby, Totten gathers beeswax from her hives and uses it with honey she extracts in soaps that she sells to a few retailers under the company name De la Terre.

Chris Harp of New Paltz, a beekeeper for 22 years and a teacher and honeybee consultant, was drawn to beekeeping while having work done on a barn on his New Paltz property. He

responded to his contractor's fear of bees living in the barn by summoning an exterminator. Afterwards, Harp was appalled at the sight of tens of thousands of dead bees, plus hundreds of pounds of honey rendered useless by pesticides. One of the services Harp now offers is the removal of unwanted hives and their transport to where they can flourish.

The Ulster County Beekeepers' Association, established in 2007 by Harp's partner, Grai St. Clair Rice, has 150 members from several New York counties, including Dutchess and Ulster. At monthly meetings at the Rosendale Recreation Center, guest speakers share their expertise and local beekeepers discuss problems and solutions. An extensive lending library is also available to members at each meeting.

Totten is a member of the association.

"I've taught myself a lot and used the Internet, but there are times when you just want to talk to people and hear how they're (handling issues)," she said.

In the course of one day, honeybees leave their hives to visit thousands of flowers. Attracted by the sweet nectar the flowers contain, they stay long enough for pollen to leap onto their bodies through static electricity. When they shake their bodies, the pollen drifts downward, to the concave "pollen baskets" on their legs. As they make additional stops at other flowers, they leave behind some of that pollen, facilitating the pollination that allows plants to grow.

Yet, threats to the honeybee's survival are all around us. Some examples:

Across the country, suburban towns are protecting their manicured lawns by issuing ordinances against dandelions, a good source of pollen for honeybees. Forests and open fields are disappearing, making way for the construction of more home and business space.

Yellowjackets have a painful sting and an interest in your picnic food and drink, but bees of all sorts are taking the blame.

That's true even though honeybees dine only on nectar, pollen and water and, unlike other flying insects, such as the yellow jacket, die when they sting and only do so rarely. Honeybee drones don't have stingers at all.

In Hudson Valley, professional beekeepers hire themselves out to transport truckloads of bee hives hundreds of miles, from one orchard or farm to another to ensure plentiful harvests.

Transported by truck beyond the few miles they usually travel, honeybees can now be affected by diseases and insecticides they would never have encountered otherwise, then carry them to local bees at future stops and back to their own hives.

Though concerned about all the challenges to the honeybee's survival, Rice said there is much people can do, even those who don't feel they have the time or space for hives. They can help the honeybee through the flowers, shrubs and trees they plant in their yards — if they choose those that are attractive and accessible to the honeybee and that, grouped together on one property, can take turns supplying pollen throughout the growing year.

Even those without property can encourage the larger community in which they live to keep the honeybee in mind when deciding what to plant in public areas.

At HoneyBeeLives.org, downloadable lists of hospitable trees and flowers are available.

“It takes a village,” Rice said.

Like many beekeepers, Rice feels comfortable working in her New Paltz hives in T-shirts and shorts. She teaches classes for adults and children, to help them observe and understand the unthreatening honey bee.

She points out that many products of importance to humans — including food, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals — come from beeswax, honey and even bee venom.

“When I became a beekeeper, it completely changed the way I looked at everything,” Rice said. “Everything honeybees do ends up being a benefit to us.”

Ulster County Beekeepers Association

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Honeybee Lives

Local classes and workshops for children and adults honeybeelives.org

Cornell University beekeeping information:

www.masterbeekeeper.org

Bee-friendly plants

For a complete list compiled by Grai St. Clair Rice, visit: http://honeybeelives.org/other_pdfs/HoneybeeLives%20Plant%20List-08.pdf