

Thriving hives in New Jersey



Written by

Aaron Morrison | Staff Writer

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The first thing a potential beekeeper needs to know is that bees don't listen.

"You can't tell the bees what to do," said Brian Rowe, a beekeeping expert who keep his bees at Douglas Farms in Gladstone and gives lectures on the subject. "Bees don't listen to you; you listen to the bees."

Bees had been down in New Jersey but the number of registered honey-producing bee colonies in the state has been climbing and has now surpassed what it was five years ago, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service. The number of colonies was about 12,000 in 2005 but it dropped to 9,000 in 2006 and remained there until 2009 when it began to rise. Last year, there were 13,000 honey-producing colonies in the state.

State apiarist Tim Schuler said the reverse is due largely to a number of beekeeping seminars — offered at state universities and farms — which are yielding more knowledgeable, responsible beekeepers and a healthier agricultural industry.

The state began offering the seminars as a way to increase the number of bees in the state after the emergence of Colony Collapse Disorder, a mysterious die-off of bees that delivered a stinging blow to the \$15 billion a year national beekeeping industry.

Many beekeeping instructors believe preventing some aspects of CCD begins in the classroom with new beekeepers. In addition to Rutgers, the New Jersey Beekeepers Association offers classes.

"The vast majority of (seminar attendees) will become backyard beekeepers," said Schuler, who also teaches the Rutgers Cooperative Extension's beginners' course. "They come from all walks of life — doctors, teachers, computer experts and laborers."

"Newer beekeepers seem to have a desire to do something to improve their environment," Schuler said.

Over the last four years, more than 1,200

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people have taken the Rutgers course. In Cape May County alone, registered bee colonies have increased from just 20 to more than 150 in a short time, Schuler said.

Recently, Rowe gave two, three-hour seminars for more than a dozen registrants at Alstede Farms in Chester Township.

Rowe lectures on identifying the queen, how to control parasitic mites, and gives demonstrations of hiving a colony and proper honeycomb form.

Roxbury residents Donald Callahan and Bruce Hillman took the seminar at Alstede Farms and volunteered to step into beekeeper protective suits for an up-close look at Rowe's demonstration.

"It took some of the intimidation out of it," Callahan said. "Until you are right in there, you don't get a sense of what you are actually getting yourself into."

Rowe said some new beekeepers underestimate the commitment required to maintain a successful hive.

"The saddest thing is to see people get their bees, have their first burst of interest in the hive, and then they just let their bees sit out there," Rowe said.

Even with a class under their belts and a sincere commitment to nurture a successful hive, prospective beekeepers can find legal limitations to keeping them on their properties.

State Department of Agriculture regulations prohibit more than three hives on properties one-quarter acre or smaller. Hives cannot be maintained within 15 feet of a property boundary line, or within 25 feet from a public sidewalk, or more than 25 feet away from a steady source of water.

Schuler said there are some beekeepers in Jersey City who install hives on their rooftops. The beekeeper's association helps members without proper space find farmers and property owners willing to provide space for hives, in exchange for pollinating their crops and plants.

Newcomers also discover the delicate balance between Mother Nature, nurture and luck. New beekeeper Tracee Palmer of Madison said she lost her bees this winter because of some avoidable and unavoidable reasons.

"I was prepared, but I didn't add another box when the bees got too crowded and they swarmed," Palmer said, referring to

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the process by which honeybees will break off from the hive to start a new colony. As a result, some of the bees left and others died because there weren't enough workers left to keep the hive going.

"It's a lot more maintenance than people realize when you take care of the bees. I'm hoping that my husband will take over the bee part of the business and I'll stick with my goats," joked Palmer, who cares for several Lamancha goats, a flock of chickens and a vegetable garden in her 1.5 acre backyard.

Both Rowe and Schuler acknowledged that successful care of the hives can prove lucrative, even for backyard beekeepers. They say fewer and fewer large-scale farmers are investing in beekeeping, which can affect crop quality and increase food prices.

"In California, you have farmers that will to pay so much to rent hives," Rowe said. "So you've got this gold mine within these bees."

But Schuler believes most of his students are not motivated to keep bees because of the financial incentives.

"The vast majority of backyard beekeepers would never do that," Schuler said. "They are content with producing honey for their family and friends' consumption."

In addition to honey, beekeeping can yield wax for candles, lip balm and other cosmetics, much of it sold at local farmers

markets.

"The more people who are trying it, the better," said Tammy Toad Ryan, a farmer who keeps hives in Morris and Essex counties. "Bees have a lot to teach us about life and working together."

For more information on the New Jersey Beekeepers Association, visit www.njbeekeepers.org.

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Douglas Farm beekeeper Brian Rowe pulls a frame full of honeycomb during a beekeeping seminar at Alstede Farms on Apr. 30, 2011. / Karen Fucito / Special to the Daily Record

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