

The Bee Line



Newsletter of the Maine State Beekeepers Association | www.mainebeekeepers.org

Why Belong to the MSBA:	3
SARE Grant Colony Update:	4
The Bee Hive in Winter:	6
Gold Star goes to Washington:	8
Thanks for the Memories:	9
The Backyard Beekeeper in Winter:	10
Passing of Friends:	11
Notes from Further Afield:	12
Bee Schools/Buzzings:	14/15

Alternative Beekeeping

by Erin MacGregor-Forbes, Master Beekeeper

“Alternative Beekeeping” is increasingly of interest, particularly among new beekeepers. Many are coming to the craft, heeding a call for new caretakers for the bees, understanding that there are forces at work that are causing our honey bee colony numbers to diminish—rapidly. Many of these new beekeepers are understandably looking for a different way to keep their bees—and many are learning about beekeeping in different ways. Where once there was a five-week bee school at the local adult education program run by an experienced local beekeeper, there are now internet bulletin boards and YouTube.

I consider myself to be among this crowd of newcomers to the beekeeping world. My first mentors in beekeeping were definitely of the virtual kind. I spent many hours reading BeeSource and learning from the mistakes of others. I got a lot of my early advice from the internet, some of it very good, some of it very bad. Since then I’ve learned to be very aware of whose advice I am taking. I want to note here that I am still on the early part of my journey in beekeeping and I *don’t* expect to ever have all of the answers. But I *do* expect my ideas to evolve and develop further with time.

I practice what most old-fashioned beekeepers would consider to be alternative beekeeping methods. I run all of my colonies on screened bottom boards. I do not use antibiotics in my hives on a regular basis. I use the essential oil based Varroa mite treatments. A significant number of my colonies are in all-medium boxes. I ran an entire year of bees on small-cell foundation. I have a top bar hive. I raise my own queens and have

been overwintering nucs since Mike Palmer spoke at the MSBA Annual Meeting in 2005. I am open to trying different techniques for managing bees, and for the most part I’ve been successful. I’d like to share some of my thoughts about the alternatives.

I guess I should start with my philosophy for beekeeping: I believe that as a beekeeper, I should do more good than harm.

Let’s face it, I steal the bees’ honey. I do leave a good amount of honey for my bees for winter—I winter in two deeps and a medium (or four mediums, depending on the hive configuration)—but I do not leave them with *everything* they stored. I also harvest a pretty significant amount of wax from the cappings of said honey. The bees provide me with a delicious, healthy, amazingly vibrant sweetener AND a source of light and energy in the beeswax. In turn, I feel it is my responsibility to help the bees in the ways that I can.

First and foremost—I feed new colonies. As I tell my students, if bees had opposing thumbs and money, they would buy sugar. (That is, assuming that there was no nectar for sale.) The reason I feed new colonies sugar syrup is to enable them to draw comb, which is literally and figuratively the backbone of the colony. Bees secrete wax as a result of consuming carbohydrates, so feeding sugar syrup to bees allows them to build wax comb at a much faster rate than they would be able to if they had to forage for all of those carbohydrates. Foraging expends carbs as well as brings them in; feeding sugar syrup at the top of the bee cluster, whether with baggie feeder or bucket, allows the colony to process those carbs with the minimum of expended energy. For the bees, this is a BIG help. Occasionally when I find a colony is low on pollen stores, I’ll feed

pollen as well—usually by bringing them a frame of pollen collected by another hive. Occasionally I will use commercial pollen substitute.

Second—I keep the bees on moveable frames which are easy to manipulate. Moveable frames allow me to evaluate the colony for strength, honey and pollen stores, disease, parasite load, and overall health. The biggest help to bee colonies in the moveable frame is for the beekeeper to be able to get in to evaluate the colony with a minimum of disruption, check the colony, and get out.

Third—I provide safe, clean, dry, well-ventilated equipment. As many beekeepers will attest, I do not tolerate old, dirty combs. When inspecting colonies for other beekeepers, I often reject old equipment. I insist on clean, intact, new equipment. Leaky outer covers, warped inner covers, cracked or broken boxes, broken frames—all of these are unacceptable to me. Beekeepers have money and the ability to build and paint a new box. The bees only have propolis. Trust me, the bees want a leak-free, easy-to-protect hive. Bees are also much happier with a new empty frame and the feed to draw new wax than they are with the old black comb of a prior year’s lost colony. Clean hive equipment is very important to colony health. I strongly recommend rotating-out old comb on a maximum five-year plan (replace 2 out of 10 frames per box per year with new ones for the bees to draw out.)

And this brings me to the subjects of hive configuration and foundation. As I’ve already said, I have a top bar hive. I also have a number of hives that I have run on completely foundationless frames. I’ve also got a few hives that I started from wax starter strips. Under duress, I started two swarms this year on plastic frames (they were the only frames

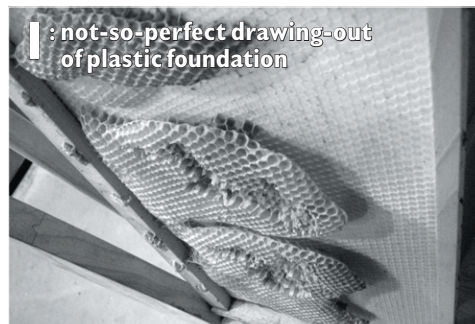
I could buy at EAS this summer, where I caught the swarms) and I've got a few hives on Duragilt foundation. For the most part I generally use wired beeswax foundation.

The biggest advantage to wired wax foundation is that the bees readily accept it and build their combs on the foundation beautifully straight and in the frames. This is why foundation is used—the bees require virtually no supervision/assistance from the beekeeper to build a hive with perfect, moveable frames. The down side to foundation is that there is an increasing body of evidence suggesting that commercial beeswax foundation contains pesticide and chemical residues. The other downside to beeswax foundation is that it requires some skill to embed into frames and can be fragile.

Plastic foundation avoids the residue issue, and if brushed with your own saved beeswax from cappings, is an excellent alternative. Unfortunately sometimes bees will “reject” the plastic and actually build their combs off of the plastic, particularly when the nectar flow is weak (photo 1). Feeding the bees when they are drawing comb will help to avoid this behavior.

The third option is to go foundationless. Foundationless hives come in an infinite number of shapes and sizes and include custom-built hives, top bar hives, Warré hives, or traditional Langstroth hives. Remember, Langstroth's original hive design included a V-shaped wedge top, much like many “alternative” hive designs today—foundation was invented quite a few years later. The best thing about foundationless frames in a traditional hive is that the combs are clean and natural and made by your own bees with their own wax and they can make whatever size cells they wish to in their own nest *and by using wood frames, they do not attach the combs to the sides of the box as they do in top bar and Warré hives*. The traditional boxes are easy to manipulate, readily available, and well-configured to bees' nest-building shape preferences. I prefer traditional wood frames with horizontal wires installed, with popsicle sticks installed horizontally in the groove top (photo 2). When the bees do it right, in my

opinion, this is the best of all worlds. The downside to all of foundationless frames is that the bees often cross up the frames making manipulation difficult or even impossible, depending on the level of crossing. This requires the beekeeper to remove these combs and results in wasted work by the bees (photo 3).



The most important part of the Alternative Beekeeper's decision regarding hive design is what is best for the bees, and second, what will be easiest for the beekeeper to manage. Because if the beekeeper finds the hive difficult to manage, s/he will not tend the bees as well as s/he should and so will not be helping the bees.

What is best for the bees:

- A clean, dry, easy-to-protect hive with sufficient space for a healthy cluster and plenty of honey for winter.
- A feeder which is in contact with the cluster of bees *upon installation* (especially important in our cool climate).
- A way for the beekeeper to treat for mites and diseases if necessary.

What is best for the beekeeper:

- Ease of access to the part(s) of the hive that the beekeeper wants to examine, with a minimum of disruption to the remainder of the hive.
- A hive which is not too heavy or too tall (8-frame medium hives are a great alternative for those with bad backs or lifting problems).
- A hive equipped with a screened bottom board so the beekeeper can easily monitor mite loads in the summer and cluster movements in the winter.

Most important for all modern-day beekeepers, alternative or traditional, is the continued study of bees. Beekeepers must dedicate a significant amount of time learning about bee biology and behavior. This is easily done with modern books and through the internet. New beekeepers have access to research articles, books, internet lectures by scientists and all manner of resources that were previously much harder to find. Beekeepers should also spend an even more significant amount of time honing their bee management skills. Hive manipulations should be as minimally disruptive to the colony as possible. New beekeepers often have a very hard time with this—unfortunately, good hive management is a skill learned best with practice. Working with a real-life mentor is the most valuable tool in developing colony management skills. A new beekeeper who visits her two colonies every two weeks in one year will obtain a similar amount of colony exposure as a beekeeper visiting her mentor's 24 colonies one single time. Plus, in the second instance, the new beekeeper gains the insight that her mentor can provide in terms of colony assessment and hive handling lessons/feedback during inspection.

Which brings me to my conclusion, that the old ways of learning beekeeping—in person, through clubs and classes and through a strong mentoring network—combined with the modern resources for learning about bee biology and behavior from the experts are the best alternatives for the both the bees and the new beekeepers. ■

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Why Belong to the MSBA? by Carol Cottrill

The Maine State Beekeepers Association offers its members a number of benefits. As you know *The Bee Line* provides updates from our State Apiarist/Bee Inspector and practical “how-to” articles to help you take care of your bees. It also lists upcoming events, local club information, and contact information for MSBA officers and Board members.

Have you used any of the materials from our library? Books and DVDs are available for use by MSBA members at no charge—the requested materials will be mailed to you, and you just return them when you are done. You’ll find a comprehensive list of library holdings, as well as return-mailing information for our volunteer Librarian Carole Armatis (368-4419) on our website.

Our annual meeting, which is now *only* available to MSBA members, is a chance to hear presentations by some of the people you probably have read about in beekeeping magazines. You have read their articles, now come to see them speak in person—you’ll have a chance to meet them and ask questions. Beekeeping is continually evolving, so keep up with new research and methods by taking advantage of this educational opportunity!

If you have been to a club meeting or a Bee School, you may have taken advantage of another benefit: our list of speakers. Members often do presentations for local clubs, organizations and schools. *The Bee Line* and the MSBA website list people who are willing to give presentations.

And speaking of the website, have you taken advantage of any of its many resources? Go to www.mainebeekeepers.org and have a look. You can find information on local chapters, bee schools, cooking with honey and links to lots of bee-related information. Coming soon: a members-only page!

If you are an MSBA member, you are eligible for the Beekeeper of the Year Award presented at the annual meeting. You can also nominate someone you feel has helped you or your club in a special way.

Your dues help finance all these benefits. All in all, a real value for only \$15.00 a year! 🐝

Board meetings are open to all MSBA members, and are held 7:00 – 8:30 PM on the third Thursday of each month at the Maine Farm Bureau, 4 Gabriel Drive, Augusta.

Upcoming: 12/17/09 & 01/21/10

SARE Grant Colony Update 11/25/09—Biddeford Yard

by Erin MacGregor-Forbes, Master Beekeeper

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving and I have the next day off from work as well, so I'll have a long weekend—a good thing, as I usually use Thanksgiving weekend to finish wrapping my colonies and stack nucs into their winter positions above full-sized colonies.

Davida Sky, former MSBA Board member and experienced beekeeper, came and did the final outside inspection for my Biddeford colonies in mid-October. She came on a beautiful Wednesday afternoon and we inspected the colonies at lunch time. The bees looked very good—we noted no significant signs of disease or anything else alarming. Most of the colonies look well-prepared for winter.

As part of the grant project, I had budgeted to pay our outside inspectors for their time. Davida asked that her stipend be donated to a bee-related charity, so I decided to loan it to a third-world beekeeper through www.kiva.org. Kiva is a micro-lending facilitator where one can loan funds to entrepreneurs all around the world. I created an account for Davida and enrolled her in the Endangered Beekeepers lending team. Then I waited to find a beekeeper seeking a loan. Davida's first loan went to a beekeeper in Lebanon. When the money is repaid, she can re-loan it again to another entrepreneur or withdraw the funds. I have several loans to beekeepers myself and I am excited to have had the opportunity to raise awareness for the benefits of agricultural micro-lending, especially to beekeepers!

As for winter preparations, we will not be wrapping the SARE colonies. We instead will be relying on the dark paint of the hives to provide the bees with good solar gain in the late winter and early spring. The homasote insulation boards have been in place since late October, so I don't have any more SARE colony yard work that needs to be done. I just went out and "hefted" the

colonies from the rear, and for the most part they feel heavy enough to make me comfortable. I am very glad that we left the colonies with their first box of honey if they made any, as many definitely feel "top heavy"—only two of the four colonies that didn't make a super of honey (and therefore don't have the extra stores) are "too light" in my opinion. I will keep my eye on them.

I've had bricks on the covers of all of the colonies since we started the project in April. I use the bricks to indicate queen status and also to weigh-down the telescoping covers "just in case." Now I also have webbing straps on each colony, cinching the entire colony together from landing board to cover. I'll keep them strapped like this until spring, again, just in case we have a terrible wind-related hive stand failure or other unforeseen event which might knock the colonies to the ground. My hope is that the strap will keep the boxes together so the colony would not be exposed even if they were tipped. Just an extra precaution.

The Screened Bottom Board inserts have all been in since September when we started our Varroa Mite treatments. I occasionally check the inserts and look at the debris. This is the best way to check Honey Bee colonies in the winter without causing

a major disruption. So far, everything looks normal. The natural mite falls are very low, colony debris patterns look centered, and there are no signs of mice in any of the colonies.

We never did feed the colonies Fumadyl medicated syrup in the fall, despite our previous decision to do so. We found our nosema levels were extremely low, with only 6 out of 20 colonies testing positive for nosema, and those colonies had very low spore counts as of the July sample dates. We had an unusually warm day on November 9 with temperatures in the mid-60s in Biddeford and we took the opportunity to gather another set of sample field bees from each colony and send them to Tony Jadcak for testing as well. It will be interesting to see what the results look like compared to the July samples. So as things stand, the only medication we've used in the hives is Apilife Var, the essential oil based mite treatment for Varroa. And now the bees are on their own until spring.

So now, like all beekeepers and bee colonies, the SARE hives and I are settling into winter mode. The bees are no longer flying on a regular basis and I am no longer checking colonies. The bees will remain in their winter clusters and I will be working over the next several months to compile our colony inspection data and prepare our outreach presentations. The active part of the beekeeping season is done. Now is the time to think about what we've learned and prepare for next spring. Of course, our results won't be complete until spring has come and we can make our final report of the colonies' survival and spring strength. So I am beginning the months of waiting (and trying not to worry).

I will be re-applying to continue this project one more year. As most of you must know, the weather this June was amazingly terrible, with 28 straight days of rain. The rain and associated congestion caused significant queen problems, with almost half of our colonies swarming or superseding. Since the project design hinges strongly on colony comparison by queen and colony origin,



Davida's first Kiva micro-loan recipient turns out to be an appreciative beekeeper in Lebanon.



this skewed our results dramatically. I will still be compiling our results and reporting them, but I hope to be allowed to run the project a second time to try to gain more data. If you would like to encourage SARE to approve our re-application, your letters of support would be sincerely appreciated. Application deadline is December 8, 2010, so any letters of support would need to be received by me on December 7th at the latest. ■

Mail to (preferred):
Erin MacGregor-Forbes,
188 Capisic Street
Portland, Maine 04102

Or email to:
queenbee@overlandhoney.com

Davida Sky surveying the Biddeford
SARE Grant bee yard after pre-winter
inspections in mid-October.



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The Bee Hive in Winter

by Tony Jadcak, Maine Apiarist

Unlike the majority of northern insects, honey bees cannot survive freezing and do not hibernate. In fact, the reason honey bees gather and store surplus honey is for consumption during the winter months when flowers are absent and temperatures are too cold for flight. The bees store honey above and around their cluster and move up into the honey reserves as winter progresses.

It is common knowledge that honey bee colonies can winter successfully in cold climates without wrapping or packing if the basic essentials regarding colony strength, health, ventilation and food stores are met. For example, in Nova Scotia, single story hives can winter on a minimum of 40 lbs of honey, while in Québec, a minimum of 70 lbs of honey properly situated in double brood chamber hives can successfully winter.

During the darkest days of winter when temperatures are often the coldest, northern hives appear lifeless. However, within the hive approximately 25 – 30 thousand winter bees (6 – 8 lbs) that differ physiologically from summer bees are clustered in an elliptical sphere, consuming honey stores and shivering to generate heat. The winter bees are reared in fall and have an abundance of fat bodies and enlarged hypopharyngeal glands due to the cessation of brood production and associated gorging on pollen and honey prior to winter.

This added nutrition coupled with lack of brood production results in a long-lived bee. Winter mortality and an increased incidence of nosema is common in years with poor fall nutrition such as the north-east experienced during 2007/2008.

Numerous studies by honey bee researchers such as Corkins, Farrar, Furgala, Owens and Moeller have defined the parameters of cluster formation and the efficacy of honey consumption and thermoregulation of colonies

during winter. Farrar used 188 thermocouples situated throughout the hive to record temperatures in single- and double-walled hives and also did experiments with exposed hives that had only screens for walls.

Bees begin to form a loose cluster when the temperature within the hive reaches 57.2°F and at 42.8°F all of the bees within the hive become involved and form an “insulating shell” of 1 – 3 inches thick. When temperatures within the hive become cooler, the cluster contracts, and visa versa as temperatures warm up. Research also demonstrated that the temperature of the cluster surface is maintained at approximately 44°F (43 – 46°F), regardless of how cold it is outside of the hive. The outer cluster temperature varied somewhat under humid conditions at a range between 48 – 52°F. Research also proves that bees do not heat the unoccupied area of the hive and the temperature of frames of honey and comb outside of the cluster are near the ambient. It has also been determined that the optimal temperature

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for honey consumption is 45°F and that hives consume more honey in warm winters, when temperatures fluctuate and when disturbed by beekeepers, mice and shrews. In general, colonies consume about 1 – 3 lbs of honey per month during October – January and honey consumption increases with the onset of brood rearing to about a ½ lb per day by April. When bees consume honey, the digestion process (oxidation of sugar) results in approximately 1 gallon of water vapor produced per 10 lbs of honey, a production of carbon dioxide and uric acid waste that accumulates in the bees' rectum. When the level of carbon dioxide reaches approximately 10%, the bees fan to create a current for air exchange within the hive.

There are competing theories regarding the behavior of the winter cluster. The most popular view is that the bees in the center of the cluster shell are more active, at a lower density and consume honey and shiver to generate heat. The bees in the shell are thought to be denser, less active and slowly rotate or exchange position with those near the center so no individual bee becomes chilled at the periphery of the cluster. It is commonly thought that the bees in the warmer portion of the cluster pass honey to the bees at the periphery of the cluster as long as the cluster has contact with its food reserves and that the heat is conducted (through insulation) outward to the insulating shell. This theory has been challenged due to the physics of "conductive insulation." Mobus has challenged the theory, citing work that indicates that the bees at the warm center of the cluster used very little honey and therefore produced little heat. He states that the bees were essentially at "idle," but were evaporating more water than those occupying the outer shell. It was found that the bees in the outer shell produced more water and carbon dioxide and therefore were the most active converters of nearby honey stores. Mobus contends that the bees within the cluster will migrate toward the periphery to get a "metabolic drink" and the outer shell bees move inward to "dry out." He states that the behavior is a selfish, survival-oriented

exchange of bees between layers which is driven by thirst or water surplus rather than an altruistic behavior of letting sister bees warm their feet. Physics and behavior aside, it is known that the clustered bees exchange position during the winter months.

It is common for bees to occasionally fly during winter and beekeepers are often concerned when they see bees scattered in the snow throughout the apiary, often at a distance from the hives. Conventional thinking is that these are the older bees and/or those afflicted with parasitic mites, virus or nosema. Bees will take brief cleansing flights in order to defecate at temperatures of 44°F or more, evidenced by yellow spots in the snow a *short* distance from the hive. Over the years I have collected and examined bees found frozen in the snow a good distance from the hives for parasitic mites and nosema, only to find the vast majority negative for these common maladies. Conversely, bees collected and examined directly in front of hives were more likely to be afflicted with nosema and/or tracheal mite.

Recently, Fred Wardwell, Searsmont, of the Tri-County Beekeepers Association, sent me an excerpt of the book *Winter World* by Bern Heinrich. Heinrich examined other possibilities than "cleansing" for bee flight during winter when temperatures were 33 – 36°F, where bees rapidly cool, fall to the snow and die.

Heinrich theorizes that perhaps the ultimate reason for some of the so-called cleansing flights could be something different. Heinrich asks, "Could the flights be scout bees searching for flowers to get food, or water to drink?" Paraphrasing Heinrich: The bee cannot know if or when the red maple, willows and poplar trees in surrounding bogs will bloom. The colony can't afford to miss early spring nutrition...but it can afford to lose some workers to "buy information." There is a premium for early swarms to leave a colony and the only way for the bees to get information on when the first blooms are available is to fly out and search. A few hundred or a few thousand worker bee deaths may be a small price

to pay for being at the first bloom. The honey bee is a superorganism and its success is measured by the reproductive output of one queen. Perhaps the scouting attempt during winter can be likened to the altruistic behavior of the worker bees that die as a result of stinging an intruder such as a bear or skunk in order to protect the hive. A most interesting hypothesis!

For now, the best winter management a beekeeper can do for the health of his/her bees is *nothing*. Do not disturb them until February or March—and when the time arrives, have a purpose, be quick and do only what is necessary. Enjoy the holidays and Happy 2010! ■



A bee call November 29, 2009 [40°F] brought Christy Hemenway to Alna to try and help this exposed wild hive.

What's going on here? Picture this: a queen leads a swarm away from the parent hive in June and clusters on a pine tree branch. All of the bees have just gorged themselves on honey and nectar in preparation. This consumption leads to the workers' wax glands going into production. Combine this with days and days of rain which make further scouting for a safe, protected hollow impossible. Workers start building a few cells to store resources. The queen starts laying. All of a sudden, brood is present. The impulse to care for the brood outweighs a genuine need to find better living quarters. They keep building. NOT a promising way to winter in Maine.



Gold Star goes to Washington!

by Christy Hemenway, Gold Star Honeybees

October was a banner month for us here at Gold Star Honeybees! As soon as we got home from the Common Ground Country Fair in September, we started preparing for The Green Festival in Washington, DC. Since we were recently certified by Green America Today as a “Green Business,” we were excited to hit the road with the Gold Star Top Bar Hive kit. And hit the road we did.

We left Maine on a Thursday to make the ten hour drive to Washington, DC. Friday was set up day—the show was Saturday and Sunday, October 10th and 11th, in the Washington Convention Center. We arrived with the already assembled Gold Star Top Bar Hive kit, brochures, sales and order forms, the battery-powered credit card terminal and a huge box of delicious honey candy, and set up shop in our “home away from home.” We had such a great booth location—we could be seen from the Organic Food Court, and from far away straight down two aisles! We bring top bars

with natural beeswax with us to such events and just love seeing people’s eyes light up when they see how beautiful, and what a feat of engineering naturally drawn honeycomb is.

Being a vendor, we had twenty complimentary passes to the Festival—so before we went, we contacted as many local beekeeping associations in the DC area as we could find, and offered those passes to interested beekeepers. Several groups turned out—there were beekeepers from Maryland and Virginia, and from DC itself—even though technically there is an ordinance against beekeeping in the District of Columbia. Keith Fletcher of Prince William County in Virginia, a very active group with a lovely brochure to attract new members, came by and stayed for quite awhile—he was even able to answer some folks’ questions about beekeeping ordinances in their locale. We threatened to make him come and work on our side of the hive! He gifted us with a jar of Black Locust honey, and it is superb. It is still adding a touch of special flavor to my yogurt and granola breakfasts.

We talked with hundreds of people over the weekend—some of them beekeepers,

some of them not, many of them wanna-bee beekeepers! Interest in bees and beekeeping is very high nowadays in these United States—even in such an urban area as Washington, DC. People came, and looked, and listened, and asked questions, they went home with honey candy and Gold Star Honeybees pens, and Gold Star brochures on natural beekeeping methods. When Sunday came I was more than a little hoarse—my voice had gotten a serious workout!

And speaking of these United States—the Green Festival trade show was great fun, and it was a terrific sales event for the Gold Star Top Bar Hive kit... But the peak moment of the trip to Washington actually came on Monday morning at about 10AM. That was when Gold Star Honeybees had an appointment at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue—yes, that’s the White House—to meet with the First Beekeeper, Charlie Brandts. Charlie replied to an email that was posted to the on-line group of the beekeeping association he is a part of, and said that he would like to know more about top bar hives. We were happy to oblige! We arrived at the security entrance just exactly at 10AM, and were passed through some pretty serious security, sniffing dogs and all, with little fanfare. Jimmy Fowler, who works for Gold Star Honeybees when we do Live Bee Relocations, and at special events like



Common Ground and the DC show, was there too—and we were both excited!

We were treated to a private tour of the White House by Charlie, met some chefs-in-training, took loads of pictures of wonderful and historic stuff, and then went to peruse the organic kitchen garden on the White House Lawn, and have a look at the famous First Bees. In Maine, we have our own peculiar issues to contend with—long, seriously cold winters and short foraging seasons, and even the occasional bear raid, but Charlie's bees have to contend with the “prop wash” from the helipad nearby their apiary. To withstand the intense wind generated by the blades of a helicopter, Charlie's conventional Langstroth beehive is strapped down quite snugly to its tall stand. It stands high up on the stand to be above the family dog's level, and has plexiglass guards in front of the vent holes in the ventilation “shim” that Charlie uses—to keep the sprinklers from drenching the inside of the hive.



As the Gold Star Top Bar Hive stands at counter height with its legs, as well as having a glass observation window down the entire length of one side, it doesn't seem that unusual to me to be able to look at the inner workings of a hive... I've even been known to lay under a Gold Star hive looking up for an afternoon and call that entertainment of the finest kind—but it was grand when we looked up at Charlie's bees, as we did, and the sight of that good-sized cluster viewed from below its screened bottom board was heart-warming on that just-a-little-chilly October day.

Little did I realize that with Monday being Columbus Day, there were no public tours of the White House being given that day. In fact, Charlie wasn't even working that day—he had made a special trip in to work just to meet us and to talk bees. Geez, Louize! So next we went out to the Gold Star van, and pulled out the Gold Star Top Bar Hive, and set it up. We showed off all its bells & whistles, and bragged (just a little bit!) about it's being made in Maine. We fondled the one-piece, beveled top bars and hefted the fifteen pound lid—the heaviest thing about the Gold Star hive you ever have to lift once you set the hive into place. Charlie and I talked about varroa mite control methods and the importance of natural beeswax. We swapped a few “bee stories.” Then all too soon it was time to pack up and start the trip back to Maine... but Jimmy and I sure had plenty to talk about on the way!

It's so nice to know that the White House has got honeybees and that Charlie is in charge of them, and that he is a believer that survivor bees, kept naturally, are our best chance at keeping healthy, self-supporting bees in the future. So here's to Charlie and “Charlie's Angels,” to the current residents of the White House, to the organic garden and its gardeners, and to the whole rest of the USA—and her beekeepers. 🍯

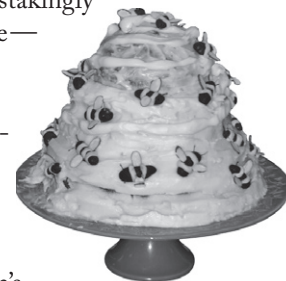
COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: One of “Charlie's Angels”; Jimmy, Christy and the Kitchen Garden; Charlie, Christy, and the First Bees.



Thanks for the Memories: Stan Brown celebrates 90 years of life, 78 years with bees!

Heartfelt thanks go out from Stan to all the fellow beekeepers who helped him celebrate his 90th birthday (just a tad early) during October's Cumberland County Beekeepers Association meeting!

For those of you who don't know, Stan Brown began beekeeping at the young age of 12 years when, as the fates would have it, he caught and began caring for a swarm. Of course, a lot has happened between then and now; 78 years, hundreds of hives, thousands of stings, and millions of honey bees later, his love affair with the honey bee persists. And were it not for those stings, he swears that he wouldn't be here today, having just celebrated his 90th birthday (October 13). Of great interest to many is his self-administered bee-sting therapy since his 20s for arthritis. And his use of honey to heal from many a wound over the years. And given that he started up the Cumberland County chapter back in 1978 with his wife Helen (who is no longer with us), you can understand why the CCBA found cause for celebration of Stan during October's meeting. After the group sang “Happy Birthday,” all indulged in Linda Morse's painstakingly prepared bee skep cake—complete with edible honey bees equipped for flight with almond-silver wings, and honey-infused ingredients throughout.



In appreciation of Stan's unique and long-spanning perspective, *The Bee Line* will interview him, with his apprentice Karen Thurlow-Kimball, for the February issue.



THE BACKYARD BEEKEEPER IN WINTER by Rick Cooper, Master Beekeeper

Many of us look at the winter months as a time to take off from beekeeping. The rest look at the winter as a time to complete all the things we did not do during those busy summer months.

How many of you sharpened your hive tool or cleaned out that smelly old smoker? The even more important question: How many of you have an item that should be repaired before spring, but put it away thinking, "I'll get to it"?

This is a good time of year to check your veil for holes. Did a bee get in your veil last season? How? Those gloves that are covered with propolis could use a good cleaning, I bet. What item was it you wanted at the bee hive every time you visited last season, but never seemed to have? All of these things are wintertime things to work on.

How about one of those bucket organizers as a way of keeping all your beekeeping stuff in one place? Good Christmas gift perhaps. I know Cabella's sells a nice swivel

seat that fits a bucket and it will save you that back-bent-over pain we all seem to get when we work hives standing.

Now I am not here to sell you something, but to just pass on some of the tips I have learned over the years. Smokers do work better when clean. Open and dump the contents out and scrape the sides and cover as best you can. Remove the screen from the bottom and scrape it down as best you can. Reassemble and place a drop of oil on the hinge. Check the bellows area to see that all the staples or nails are tightly in place. Scrub the propolis off the back with an SOS pad and you are ready for spring smoke. Hive tools should be sharpened on the hooked end. A light filing or grinding should see you through next season. Do not sharpen it so sharp you cut yourself when using it. Gloves probably cannot be patched, but if they look okay, a good scrubbing won't hurt them. A solvent that will remove propolis is likely to make the gloves deteriorate. Do the best you can. Plastic helmets can be cleaned

with soap and water, and fiber helmets can be washed-down with a damp rag. The fiber helmets can also be sprayed with a clear waterproofing finish to help them stand up better.

Here is the one sales pitch I will give you: Bottom boards take a tremendous beating from both the weather and the bees. To make your bottom boards last longer, it is necessary to dry them out from time to time. It might pay you to purchase a second bottom board and get it painted this winter so that you can replace the one on your hive now. Allow the wet bottom to dry, scrape it down and repaint it. With one additional bottom you can move a dry one to each of your hives over the summer.

Now the rest of your time should be spent enjoying the season with your families and reading what you can find on bees the world over. Maine has wonderful programs for getting beekeepers started, but we are still trying to figure out what to do for intermediate beekeepers, so we and you rely on the journals. *American Bee Journal* and *Bee Culture* magazine. Hummm another good Christmas present would be a subscription to either journal.

I'll be in the shop most of the winter if you have a question or two. Please feel free to drop by or give me a call.

My Bee School 2010 is listed below.

2010 Beekeeping Classes

Saturdays, 9AM – 3PM

Class 1: Feb 20, Mar 6, Mar 20, 2010

Class 2: Feb 27, Mar 13, Mar 27, 2010

(Both classes will meet Apr 17, 2010 for package bee delivery and will run from 9AM until we are finished with the installation of bees in the hives).

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Passing of Friends

Dear Fellow Beekeepers:

I am writing to let you know that one of our members has passed away. Barry Gallant, my brother-in-law, died Dec 1. As we are still a fairly new group, we don't know each other well, but Barry really enjoyed the club meetings.

Cards could be sent to his wife:

Roberta Gallant
PO Box 195
Waterboro, ME 04087

- Ron Sargent, Hollis

WATERBORO - Barry Dennis Gallant, age 70, of Ossipee Hill Road, formerly of Saco, passed away unexpectedly on Dec. 1, 2009 at the Maine Medical Center. He was born in Biddeford, Maine on April 17, 1939, a son of Clayton and Beatrice (St. Lawrence) Gallant. He graduated from Thornton Academy in 1958. For many years, Barry worked for Maremont, which later was named Saco Defense, as a machinist.

He was a member of the Jaycees, and served as a Senator, and a member of the York County Beekeepers Association.

Barry loved being outdoors and he enjoyed hiking, camping, traveling, canoeing, beekeeping and especially gardening. Recently retired, he and his wife spent several months camping from Maine to Alaska and back. He spent this past summer on his latest project, the Bramble Hill Farm Stand. An avid photographer, he photo-documented his many life adventures. Barry never knew a stranger and made fast friends everywhere he went. His infectious smile and hardy laugh will be remembered warmly by his family and friends always.

He is predeceased by his parents; and a brother—Clayton Gallant Jr. Barry is survived by his beloved wife Roberta (Sargent) Gallant; children—Robin Letellier and her partner Glen Seavey of Kennebunkport, Steven Letellier of Waterboro, Joseph Letellier and his partner Jackie McLeod of Lakeland, FL, Mark Letellier and his partner Kelly Raposo of Sandown, NH, Kelley Letellier and her partner Wendy Wolfe of Jacksonville Beach, FL, Scott Gallant of Saco, and Shari Walton and her husband Paul Walton III of Brookline, NH; ten grandchildren—Jesse, Tim, Richard, Kati, Zachary, Brandon, Michael, Nicole, Kyle and Allison; and two great grandchildren—Sophie and Aiden.



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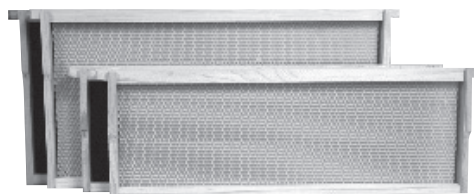
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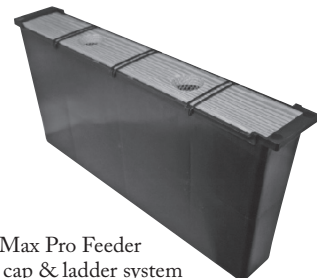
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NOTES FROM FURTHER AFIELD

Massachusetts Beekeepers Fall Meeting and Honey Show

by Christy Hemenway

Karen Kimball and I attended the Massachusetts Beekeepers Fall Meeting and Honey Show held in Leicester, MA on October 17th.

It took three years to get Dr. Marla Spivak all the way from the University of Minnesota to Massachusetts, but the wait was worth it! It was an information-packed day and well worth the minimal drive.

Dr. Spivak, known world-wide for her work with developing Minnesota Hygienic bees, spoke this weekend about anything but. Her morning talk was on Propolis and Bee Health. Propolis is a complex plant resin gathered and used by bees to seal them inside of a “bee tree”—acting as an anti-bacterial, anti-viral, and an anti-fungal—creating a sterile shell inside the hollow of a bee tree—known as the “propolis envelope.” Her recent studies have included rating different types of propolis for their ability to thwart bacteria. She discussed a method of collecting propolis that consisted of several layers of mesh arranged at the top of the colony—using mesh much like the bags that oranges are sold in. It seems that gaps up to 1/4" are filled with propolis by the bees, but that 3/8" gaps will be filled with wax. So the layers of mesh need to create spaces in the 1/4" range. Then, when the bees have propolised the mesh bag, it is removed from the hive and frozen—when it is frozen propolis becomes quite brittle, and flexing and bending the mesh will cause the propolis to crack away from the bag.

Dave Mendez, the VP of the ABF—American Beekeeping Federation—took a moment between speakers to promote the annual ABF Convention which will be held at the Wyndham in Orlando, Florida this January 12 – 16, 2010. The convention will be a joint meeting with Canadian and American bee folks, with a load of interesting and educational speakers. More info at www.american-beekeepingfederation.com/ABF_Conference.html

Dr. Heather Mattila from Wellesley College spoke next, discussing queen bees and polyandry. For those not up to speed on their “poly-” vocabulary—polyandry means “having multiple mates.” Only about 25 species are polyandrous, but honeybees are certainly one of them! The advantages of polyandry to the honey bee are many—the genetic diversity that comes from one queen mating with multiple drones provides many benefits—including improved disease resistance, better brood viability, nest stability, and a stronger attraction to the queen. A well-mated queen has a better pheromone profile, which improves the division of labor in the hive, increases the colony’s productivity, and makes for fitter bees. You might say “it’s all good!” And here’s an interesting tidbit—the highest number of matings on record for a European honey bee is 44. The highest number for a Giant Honey Bee is 104. Can you imagine!!!

After lunch, Dr. Spivak talked about a subject that is often on beekeeper’s minds—varroa mites, and how best to monitor for them. Since 1986, beekeepers have been battling the varroa mite by using some serious chemicals—from 1986 through 1998, the toxin of choice was a pyrethroid called Fluvalinate. When the mites developed a resistance to Fluvalinate, chemists went on to create another serious chemical, this time an organophosphate known as Coumaphos. This was in use from 1999 to 2005, but then, the varroa mite developed a resistance to it as well. During those years the beekeepers’ approach to bee health became almost automatic—identify the pest, treat with chemicals. We need to break this cycle—using management techniques and breeding programs to help build a stronger bee, and discourage the use of chemicals in the beehive. With viruses, varroa mites, nosema, nutritional deficiencies, environmental pesticides, and pesticides purposely placed in the hives by beekeepers, bees have been struggling.

Dr. Spivak’s favored method of monitoring for varroa mites is the alcohol wash—since its accuracy surpasses most other methods. But the sugar roll method means that you do not kill the bees in the process of monitoring. The sugar roll method requires that you gather 300 bees from the brood nest portion of a colony—this is approximately 1/2 cup of bees. Using a square-sided cup to gather the bees makes it easier, and if you run the side of said cup *downwards* over the bees’ backs, they will fall easily into the cup. So your half cup measure, when full, gets you approximately 300 bees. After pouring these bees into a quart jar, covered with a lid made of 1/8" hardware cloth, add 1 – 2 heaping tablespoons of powdered sugar. Roll the bees until they are thoroughly coated with the sugar. Then LET IT SIT FOR AT LEAST ONE MINUTE! The heat of the bees, combined with the sugar dust, needs a minute to adhere to the mites’ feet, and then it begins to dislodge the mites from the bees. After a minute, vigorously shake the sugar and mites out into a white container—white to make it easier to spot the dark mites.

Then the question becomes—how many mites are too many mites? The threshold that Dr. Spivak recommends is 4.3 mites per 100 bees. This is rather a lot of math, but she arrives at this number in this way: Take the number of mites you find using the sugar-roll method, and multiply it by 1.3. This should give an accurate estimate of how many mites are throughout the rest of the colony. So if you found 10 mites, multiply by 1.3, and you get 13. If you had 13 mites for 300 bees (divide 13 by 300), you get .043 mites; multiply by 100 bees, and get 4.3 mites per 100 bees. Honey bees, provided they are stationary bees, can cope with a mite level of 4.3/100 bees. She emphasizes that *some* mites are okay—decimating the mites in the colony is not necessary! She says that Minnesota Hygienic bees can overwinter with a mite count, using this method, of up to 8! Whatever method you use, if you use it consistently as your standard, then your data becomes more useful with each time, as it establishes a trend. Any deviation from this trend is unusual and can be useful in predicting and preventing problems.

Dr. Spivak posted a website available from the University of Minnesota where one can access an online beekeeping class—\$25 allows for four years of access [www.extension.umn.edu/honeybees]. There are other great courses available there as well, including a queen-rearing course.

The last session of the day was a second talk by Dr. Matilla. She talked about bees' swarming behavior. Her studies have shown that the most likely time for a colony to swarm is at 10AM, but that they can go as late as 2PM. They may "bivouac," or gather in a cluster for as short a time as four hours, up to three days. She had some very good video of the last five minutes before a colony swarmed—showing the increasing agitation of the colony from calm to the workers "piping," to bees giving the "buzz-run" signals, exciting other bees to be ready to depart, and then their actual departure which took under 30 seconds. Only 30% of swarms that depart their parent hive actually survive after swarming—not very good odds, considering!

All in all, a very good meeting. A raffle was held, and various beekeeping equipment was raffled off, including a Gold Star Top Bar Hive kit, which was won by Ted Jones, the President of the Connecticut Beekeepers—the same group that just organized SNEBA (the Southern New England Beekeeping Assembly)—which took place on November 21st. There was a considerable group of Maine State Beekeepers planning to attend that Assembly from groups all up and down the coast—the subject was "Survivor Bees for the Surviving Beekeeper." The speakers were Dr. Larry Connor, David Mendes, and Randy Oliver. Look for the notes from that meeting in your next *Bee Line*!

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Rick Cooper

Beekeeping School: see page 10

**Oxford County
Cooperative Extension
5-Week Bee School**

Feb 19 – Mar 19, 2010
Fridays, 6 – 7:30PM

FMI: Barbara Murphy, 743-6329
or bmurphy@umext.maine.edu

**Western Maine Beekeepers
12-Week Bee School**

Jan 20 – Apr 21, 2010
Wednesdays, 6 – 8:30PM*
(no class during two-week
school vacation; registration
6PM on first night)
Region 9 School, Route 2, Mexico
FMI: Carol Cottrill, 364-0917
or WMBAmail@msn.com

* *Note the slight time change*

**York County
Cooperative Extension
5-Week Bee School**

Instructors: Master Beekeeper
Erin MacGregor-Forbes
and Larry Peiffer

Feb 24 – Mar 31, 2010 (incl. * date)
Wednesdays, 6 – 8:30PM

FMI: YCCE, 324-2814
or frankw@umext.maine.edu

Ellsworth**5-Week Bee School**

Feb 23 – Mar 23, 2010
Tuesday evenings

FMI: Andrew Dewey, 244-9434
or andrew@beeberlywoods.com

**Cumberland County
Cooperative Extension****5-Week Intermediate Bee School:
Apiary Management**

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Erin MacGregor-Forbes
Guest Instructor: Maine State
Apiarist Anthony Jadcak

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BUZZINGS

Submit all announcements and news at least 15 days prior to publication date (see page 3).

2010 Agricultural Trades Show

January 12 – 14, 2010 — Tuesday, Jan 12: 9AM – 5PM
Wednesday, Jan 13: 9AM – 8PM
Thursday, Jan 14: 9AM – 3PM

Augusta Civic Center

In keeping with tradition, the MSBA will present a beekeeping exhibit during the show and is in need of volunteers to staff the “bee booth.”

Volunteers typically serve three- or four-hour shifts talking to the public about bees, promoting beekeeping and the MSBA, and selling honey and wax products.

MSBA members interested in volunteering their time, donating honey/wax products or selling products on consignment should contact Tony Jadczak: 287-7562 or Anthony.M.Jadczak@maine.gov

Bee City is For Sale

Tired of all the snow and being cold? Want to move to South Carolina but don't know what you would do once you got there? Well, here is your answer! Bee City's owner is retiring, and it would be a real shame to see this place close its doors—go to www.beecity.net for more details on this wonderful facility. Location is approximately 30 miles from Charleston on the beautiful Edisto River. Workshop and gift shop are dedicated to making and selling bee-related products. The classroom is set up for bee education field trips, though could be easily converted into a house. Restaurant menu is much more extensive than what is shown on the web site. It serves outstanding fresh, local seafood.

Please *do not* call Bee City directly to inquire about the sale, as employees are not to be aware that the property is on the market. Instead, you may *contact me for more information*:

Lea Givens, Coldwell Banker Commercial, Charleston, SC
liveness2002@hotmail.com or 843-814-8430

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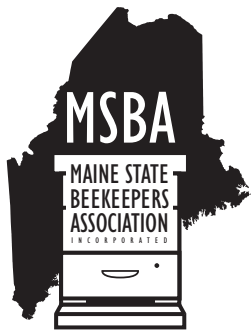
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THE BEE LINE

Newsletter of the Maine State Beekeepers Association, Inc.

Lori Harley, *Editor*
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