

State of Bee-ing

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My journal entry on July 22, 1982 begins with this exclamation- "*The best of my birthday gifts! Hive number one has a queen!*" As a hobby beekeeper, I share a common affliction with other beekeepers. That is, we tend to get buzzed by just about everything about honeybees. Why? Perhaps it is that honeybees are one of nature's more amazing creatures. Perhaps it is our appreciation of the essential part that bees play in the pollination of flowers and many of our most cherished foods. Without a doubt it is the subsequent bounty we reap in precious honey and beeswax. More profoundly, keeping bees connects us to our agricultural roots. It connects us to nature, and it connects us to ourselves.

People everywhere are getting connected through beekeeping. With the growing awareness of drastically dwindling honeybee populations, "backyard" beekeeping is blossoming. Country folks, suburbanites and city dwellers alike are becoming more aware of the important niche that honeybees fill in our world and are putting on bee veils to experience the joys of beekeeping. It is a new kind of back to the land movement that doesn't require going back to the land. All that is needed is a place to put a hive. A patio or a corner of a garden will do. A hive or two won't change the world but it will greatly benefit your garden or fruit trees. It will also lead you into the fascinating and mysterious world of the highly developed matriarchal honeybee society.

While facts and mysteries about honeybees will boggle the mind, it is easy to appreciate them by simply observing them. I have been known to sit for long periods in front of my beehives on a warm summer day. Like Rodan's famous statue, I will sit, and think, and watch. This state of "bee-ing" slows me down. It connects me to what is happening in my backyard and a to a world I am often too busy to notice. To simply watch the bees also connects me to the "wildness" of the bees. We might call ourselves "keepers" of bees, but what we really do is to keep hives. Bees are generally agreeable creatures and will enjoy the benefits of a well-managed hive, but they are wild beings and are free to leave- and often will- at any time. The reasons for this are many; some, as the case with Colony Collapse Disorder, are not yet understood. To maintain a healthy hive requires much more than a love of bees. It requires knowledge of bee behavior, bee health, and the ability to assess the conditions of a hive and the steps to take to ameliorate any threats to the population. The process of learning makes us more observant, more inquiring, more understanding, and more patient. An apiary degree is not necessary to keep a hive in a backyard garden, but knowing how to best keep bees free from disease is obviously beneficial to the bees and helps prevent the spread of diseases to other colonies that might be located nearby.

There are many resources for the beginning beekeeper. The Internet is a great place to start, and there are a number of informative and inspiring books on the joys of beekeeping. By far the best way to get started is to contact a local beekeeper who is willing to help. They might be able to provide you with a hive and give you hands on assistance to get the hive started. They can also keep you informed of issues that bees and beekeepers face specific to our area here in the Uncompahgre Valley.

Backyard beekeeping will reward you in so many ways beyond the richness of the honey you might be fortunate enough to harvest. But even if you never keep bees, you can help the plight of the honeybee by buying local honey and supporting the protection of our open space for agriculture for foraging. Let your dandelions bloom and appreciate them for the food bees depend on early in the spring. Plant some flowers and a garden. A world without the buzzing of honeybees is unthinkable; the silence would be deafening.

