

Beekeeping in Henry County

Cave paintings found in Spain, made around 6000 B.C., show people collecting honey from bee colonies. Man has been keeping bees ever since. Since honey bees are not native to North America, beekeeping did not exist here until early settlers from brought the European honey bee from England in 1622. The popularity of beekeeping peaked in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. During the first world war and the great depression, sugar was scarce and could be expensive when found but almost everyone knew of a tree where there was a honey bee colony. A person could order a bee hive out of the Sears and Roebuck catalog, put the colony from the tree in the hive, and collect honey to use in baking or on top of biscuits and cornbread.

Unfortunately, beekeeping began to decline soon after that. During the 1950's many people moved from rural to suburban areas, where bees were not traditionally kept. During the 1970's and 80's, tracheal and varroa mites were introduced to North America. The effects of these mites on honey bees have been devastating. Many people who had kept bees for 50 years or more gave up the hobby at this time. Those that stayed learned how to deal with it and had been doing a pretty good job until just a few years ago. In 2006 a phenomenon known as Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) began spreading across the United States.

Over the past 3 years, more than half of the managed honey bee colonies in the United States have disappeared. This has been attributed to CCD. Colony collapse disorder is of great concern to many folks around the world, especially those that rely on honey bees for pollination of fruit and vegetable crops. It has even caught the attention of the general public, especially when they realize that one of every three bites of food they take can be attributed to pollination done by honey bees and other pollinating insects. Due to the high publicity caused by CCD, many people are starting to get interested in beekeeping again.

Over the past several years there has also been a movement in the United States for people to buy their fruits, vegetables, and other products from local producers rather than from large corporations that ship produce from overseas. The honey industry has benefitted from this and a honey stand can now be found at most farmers markets across the state of Missouri. Some folks have even attributed the growing interest in beekeeping to retired baby boomers who remember when their parents or grandparents kept bees and want to try it themselves. No matter what the reason is, growing interest in beekeeping is a good thing. We have even had a growing interest right here in Henry County.

We recently completed a four-session short course on beginning beekeeping. The class sold out and we were not able to accept all students that wanted to attend. Others had a conflict with the scheduled dates and were not able to attend. As a result, we are starting an area beekeeping association in Henry County where beekeepers and non-beekeepers can get together and learn more about honey bees and beekeeping. If you are a beekeeper, someone who is interested in becoming a beekeeper, a gardener who is concerned about pollination, or just someone who is interested in nature, then you should check out the local beekeeping association. We are currently working on setting up our first meeting. For more information, contact Travis Harper at the Henry County Extension Office by phone (660)885-5556 or e-mail harpertw@missouri.edu.