

So, you want to be a beekeeper... a year in the life of a Georgia beekeeper.

By Deborah Simmons

Every day you see news that our honeybees are in danger. Pesticides, urban growth, and natural disasters are thought to be contributing to a decline in our honeybee population. Humankind depends on the honeybee to pollinate the world's crops — our food sources. Add to that, the fact that people are becoming more and more conscious of the foods they eat and are more concerned than ever about the source of their food. Honeybees inevitably find their way into that conversation. For this reason (and many others), beekeeping is fast becoming a hobby that people are interested in. It sounds simple, right? You buy a hive and some bees and put them in your backyard. Right? Well, not so fast!

What is it really like to be a beekeeper? What is involved? What do you do day-to-day? What are the costs? What kind of commitment is necessary? Those are all questions that anyone contemplating becoming a beekeeper needs to answer very early in the process. Hindsight is not the best way to learn about bees! So, let's look at what a year in the life of a beekeeper is like. We'll start with a little disclaimer — this is just a summary. There is much more to being a beekeeper than would be possible to outline in the scope of this article. Also, for the purposes of this article, we'll not be addressing the issue of bee pests and diseases — a topic all its own. Those issues are addressed all year, in every season and by all beekeepers. So, that being said, let's begin in the Spring — the busiest and the most fun time of the beekeeper's year!

In the early Spring, beekeepers are getting their colonies ready for the busiest time of the year. Assuming that their hives survived winter, beekeepers may be feeding their colonies since they are often depleted after a winter of having to feast on their winter stores of honey and pollen. They are also managing their colonies to prevent their bees from swarming in March/April. Swarming is the bee's way of procreating. Half of their hive leaves with the queen to start a new hive, leaving the other half to create a new queen (yes, they can do that) and begin the process of replacing the bees that left with the old queen. While some beekeepers allow their colonies to swarm, most don't want to lose as much as 70% of the colony, so they manage the hive to prevent a swarm — that's all a part of learning to be a beekeeper! About April 1, the main nectar flow begins, and foragers descend on the countryside by the thousands to collect pollen and nectar, which they turn into honey. The queen is busy back in the hive laying eggs (1500 or more per day) and those eggs will become new bees in about 21 days. At that rate, it doesn't take long before their box is full of bees — another issue that the beekeeper must manage. If they don't, their bees will swarm — oh, the never-ending issue of swarming! During the Spring and into the Summer and Fall, the beekeeper will inspect their hives every 2-4 weeks (depending on the age of the colony). Those inspections, of course, require the beekeeper

to “suit up” in protective gear — that can be a pretty hot task during the hot summer months!

In May, the nectar flow is still driving everything in the bee yard. The bees are bringing in nectar and converting it to honey in a process that entails evaporating the water in the nectar to a predetermined percentage, and then covering it with a wax capping. Most of this honey is stored in the hive in honey “supers” — a box on top with frames that the bees build comb on to store the honey. This stored honey can be very heavy -- one medium-sized honey super will weigh approximately 52 pounds and beekeepers will need to be able to lift those when it’s time to harvest the honey or inspect the bees.

At the end of May, the nectar flow stops (for the most part). The bees are still actively bringing in pollen but there is little nectar to be had. They have, hopefully, stored enough honey to last until next Spring and provide some excess for their keepers to harvest. It is at this point that most beekeepers will harvest their honey. The beekeeper needs to pay close attention to the amount of honey they harvest so that they leave enough for the bees to survive until the next nectar flow — the following year! If they make the mistake of harvesting most of the honey, they will need to feed the bees sugar syrup to help them through the “dearth” period after the nectar flow stops. It’s always best to take care to leave the bees sufficient resources to make it until the next nectar flow without having to feed them but, many times, beekeepers still need to feed their bees for various other reasons.

Once Fall comes, a new round of heightened activity begins — preparing for winter. Starting in August, beekeepers are inspecting their hives to determine whether they have sufficient resources (honey and pollen) to make it through the winter. If they don’t have enough, they may need to aggressively feed their bees to make sure they can make it through winter. During the Fall, beekeepers are also assessing what preparations they need to make for winter. This can entail answers to many questions. Should they insulate the hive (or not), provide ventilation of the hive (or not), they may need to change some of the components of the hive or add others for the winter, install windbreaks, secure the hive for strong winds or add precautions against critters (mice, skunks, etc.). They may need to balance resources by “playing Robin Hood” -- moving honey from another hive that has plenty to make sure everyone has sufficient resources to last.

And, finally, Winter arrives. Every beekeeper goes into winter with a bit of apprehension — will my bees make it to Spring? Regular full inspections are replaced with quick looks on warm, sunny days to make sure their bees are surviving, have enough resources and to make sure there are no other issues. On warm, sunny days bees will be visible at the front of their hive. They need to use that brief time to get out of the hive and take a “cleansing flight” — they need to go to the bathroom! They may also bring in some pollen in the late winter when some plants/trees begin to produce pollen. That can be as early as January/February, surprisingly, but there won’t be significant nectar yet for another couple of months. Beekeepers are always happy to see bees outside the hive. Though it’s not empirical evidence that their bees are surviving, it always lifts a beekeeper’s heart to see bees on those warm days.

Late winter brings new activity. Though it seems like a long way off, the busy Spring/Summer season is just around the corner and beekeepers must be ready. Winter is the time for beekeepers to do all those chores that never seem to get done during the busier seasons. New boxes may need to be built and painted, new frames for the combs built and the foundation waxed, tools need to be cleaned, repairs need to be made and bee suits need to be cleaned too — they take a beating during the year! Winter is also a great time to read those beekeeping books that you never seem to get enough time to read during the busier times of the year -- beekeeping education never ends. Just about the time that you think you've learned it all, the bees let you know that they don't read books! So, you must be ready with knowledge before you need it. The bees will always keep you on your toes so you have to try to stay a step or two ahead of them!

So, here we are full circle, back to where we started. It's been a busy year with lots to do and lots to learn. Wow — it's also been fun. Sometimes we forget how much fun it is when we are sweating inside a bee suit in 95-degree weather! We've learned more in this year than we thought possible. We've made some new friends at our beekeeping club. We've communed with many thousand little bee-souls and been amazed by them every day. We may have had some heartache too. Unfortunately, bees die (for all sorts of reasons). It can be heartbreaking to lose a colony, but it happens every day to some poor beekeeper — we just hope, pray, and try to manage our hives so that it doesn't happen to us. But it inevitably does — that's a part of it too. Beekeeping has its highs and the lows but, in the end, beekeeping is an addictive hobby that always surprises us, satisfies us, keeps us growing, keeps us guessing and reaching for more knowledge in our attempt to understand these little creatures. And, lastly, it's a hobby that never ever gets boring and always keeps us looking forward to the next season.