

Managing A Training Apiary

Year 3

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Now into my third year managing a training apiary, I have learned a lot about how centralized mentoring can support new beekeepers and how proper planning is essential for its success. I started in the Spring of 2017 with two hives and two packages generously supplied by my local bee club. I had been the club's mentor coordinator for many years but increasing interest in beekeeping created a condition where there were just not enough experienced beekeepers to cover the 50 to 60 yearly bee class graduates. In addition, the geographic area that needed mentor support became too large for successful coverage. My solution was to create a centralized training yard where hive management skills could be learned, experience gained, and fears overcome. Bringing new beekeepers to the bees uses mentor time and knowledge more productively. It allows new beekeepers more opportunities to participate in a larger range of conversations, with many learning opportunities, and helps introduce advanced beekeeping techniques.

This arrangement has morphed from the original club-sponsored, two training hives to a fourteen-hive production yard with a mix of different hive configurations and multi

levels of beekeeping experience. A prevailing comment from new beekeepers is that they would not have been successful or continued with beekeeping without having had this unique educational opportunity. As a measure of that value, many people have continued to participate for all three years, adding their knowledge and experience to the group. Attendance



at each yard visit has grown to fifteen or more beekeepers - a good problem to have!

Throughout the season, the twice monthly process consists of meeting and examining each hive with an emphasis on bee and brood quality and quantity. Frames with interesting conditions are passed around so that everyone can see what is different and what merits additional discussion - the good, the bad, and occasionally, the ugly. We have seen normal issues such as: no eggs or larva but plenty of bees; mites on bees; mites on larva; and queen cells in all stages - the list is long. Surprisingly, some participants finish their first-year bee class without knowing the difference between worker and drone larva, how the brood nest is structured in the hive, where the nectar and pollen is stored relative to the brood, or how to remove frames for hive inspection - things an experienced beekeeper consistently looks for and does routinely. Those new to beekeeping usually can't identify what they are seeing and can become bewildered when they have nothing comparable to what they observe in their own hives. At our training apiary, the major goal is for everyone to have live bees in the Spring. From that, more advanced apiary management is possible. Our Spring 2019 success rate at the training yard was a 12% Winter loss, well under the state average.

From these hives we were able to meet the next goal: teaching nuc production. In keeping with the emphasis on training, queens were distributed to beekeepers with at least two years experience, most of whom successfully produced nucs. These twin goals (live bees in the Spring and nuc production) - have become the training yard's focus, turning people new to beekeeping into second-year beekeepers who can produce their own nucs with overwintered bees.

Setting up and managing a training yard has its challenges. The most important part of the process is finding a suitable location that limits general public access but is easily reached for yard maintenance. A yard location that is not privately owned, allows parking for fifteen or twenty vehicles, and that has restrictions to prevent adverse interaction between the bees and the general public is not easy to find in most urban areas. Public parks with sports fields, swimming pools, walking paths, concession stands, and similar attributes may not be the best option. I was fortunate to have been allowed to set up my training yard on a 360-acre research and training site for history, historic preservation, and agriculture, owned by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

How supply costs are covered and profit is allocated if honey or nucs are sold is also worth consideration. In my situation, because the hives belong to me and there is no charge to participate, this has not been an issue. But



this should be a pre-arranged, documented agreement between the site manager and the lead beekeeper. I have found that a case of honey is a workable offering.

A designated person with accountability to the site's owner and/or management and with a reliable contact method is essential. I was contacted by my site's management about a swarm and was able to capture it quickly because they knew how to reach me. I also encourage the site's staff to join in hive inspections and provide extra bee suits for this purpose.

The large time commitment for the lead beekeeper, scheduling changes due to weather, and the seasonal nature of beekeeping make coordination and timely communication very important. Weekend only availability for many hobby beekeepers and the lead beekeeper adds additional structural constraints. I have been successful in minimizing these conflicts by following a fixed schedule of meeting every other Saturday at 9:00 AM. People can plan ahead as needed, participate in the training, then go check their own bees, applying what was covered in the training session.

Physical space around the hives limits the number of participants to a maximum of about 20 people. We try to avoid blocking the flight path to the entrance as much as possible but the occasional three people deep and surrounding the hive happens. The bees have a way of letting us know when we forget this one!

Possible disease transmission through other people's bee suits, gloves, and tools is an additional point

of concern. People need to supply their own protective equipment including gloves if they use them. Bare-handed hive inspection and frame handling is encouraged, but there is an adjustment period before people become acclimated to the gloveless approach and some never

advance to that level of confidence.

Liability is always a consideration. At my training



apiary, existing Virginia farm law for agricultural tourism helps to prevent successful litigation but the cost of defending against unsuccessful attempts could be high. The site is also carefully controlled with appropriate signage, secured gates and contact information.

One early issue was the sponsoring club's desire to manage the process, control the scheduling, plan the setup, and dictate site procedure. A written procedure has been developed that covers the various activities associated with the maintenance of the training yard. Much of the debate was associated with the cost of the yard supplies and the allocation of any income from the yard. The final compromise was that the lead beekeeper would not be compensated for any expenses and the club would not have input as to how the yard is managed. While this solution was accepted by both entities, future modifications including more flexible club support would be advantageous.

To bring advanced technology to beekeeping, I contacted BroodMinder, who very generously supplied a Citizen Science Kit so that data from the training yard could be uploaded to their www.beecounted.org web site. This hive performance data has been of interest to many participants. The site information can be extrapolated to other hives located in the wider region. Recording and reporting outside temperature and humidity along with internal hive temperature and humidity provides helpful statistics. Brood nest data and hive weight changes have opened wide-ranging discussions as to what the hive is doing. Speculation can then be confirmed through hive inspection.

Started with two hives, the training yard has developed into a successful apiary. Because the hives are managed by experienced beekeepers, there is very little hesitancy to perform hive manipulations, compare mite treatment options, carry out queen and swarm management and other necessary activities. Also different types of equipment, feeding of protein supplement, allowing hives to produce new queens, making splits, keeping records and so forth adds to the learning experience. For new beekeepers all of this is in addition to their classroom experience.

Watching people go from being afraid to hold a frame of bees to inspecting a hive and giving a running synopsis of what the frames tell them is a mentor's reward. Hearing second and third-year beekeepers talk about running out of room for the splits they made with queen cells makes the hard work and large time commitment well worth the effort.



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