

Beekeeping 101

By Basil Badley

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If you have a larger lot and a little time, a hive might be in your future.

Ever thought about honeybees and what it would be like to get or make a hive of your own? Let me tell you my story, which is equal parts fun, adventure-filled, and a little time-consuming, though not difficult. I'm glad I did it. I'm glad I found a professional beekeeper to take over. And, I'm glad I still have hives full of bees.

Why consider obtaining a beehive? There are several reasons, including honey production and the fact that it's a fun and fulfilling hobby. Plus, it impresses your kids and grandkids, and sometimes even the neighbors—although there will always be one or two who think you're a little off your rocker.

Pollination, however, is perhaps the best reason for starting a colony of honeybees. Pollination is the transfer of pollen from a male anther to a female stigma, enabling fruits to set and develop. We've all seen hives in farmers' fields. We've all seen honeybees at work. Honeybees, mason bees, bumblebees and syrphid flies do most of the pollinating, with the honeybee coming in first at more than 80 percent of total pollination performed. And, of course, the honeybee is the only pollinator that provides honey as well.

My beekeeping venture started with my stepson giving me a book titled *Beekeeping for Dummies*. I wasn't offended by that title; I was interested. I read it from cover to cover and felt I had really learned something. My fifth-grade twin grandsons both read it and they felt the same. When I told my oldest son about the book and that I was considering starting a colony of bees, he advised me to underline *Dummies*.

Undeterred, I decided to proceed. I got on the Internet and ordered a beehive from the *Dummies* author's Web site, plus the tools that I would need. The hive arrived in short order and I put it together and later painted it.

Next, using sites listed in the *Dummies* book, I ordered my bees online. I chose Italian honeybees, because all the literature indicated they were good producers and gentle, which proved to be true. The bees were to be delivered in April. Anxiously I waited.

In the middle of April, I received a call from the Post Office that my bees had come. It was 5:30 a.m.; they seemed anxious for me to get them quickly. I got down there at 6:15 a.m. and picked up my bees. The Post Office employees seemed relieved. (Perhaps if you want really prompt service, you should send your letters with a colony of bees.)

Supposedly, there were to be around 11,000 bees in a box about the size of a shoebox with screens on two sides. I did not count them. The queen was in her own box and there was a marker on her so I would know she was the queen. I named her Sophia. It was a nice day so I put the "girls" in a cool place in the garage, sprayed them with sugar water and waited until late afternoon to "hive" them. I could no longer postpone dealing with them so I donned my beehive clothes and took the bees to the hive. My wife followed with her camera, and my dog followed as well. Hiving the bees went smoothly, except that my dog got stung when he got too close and annoyed them. This turned out to be a good thing, as he never got too close again.

The books advised not to peek for at least five days and up to a week. I complied. Thereafter I opened the hive every two to three weeks, continued to feed them, inspected the queen, and watched the colony grow. Everything seemed to be fine, but I did not know what to look for, so I asked a professional beekeeper to look at my hive. He said that it was doing fine, but I had to feed them more.



Honeybees, shown here on sedum blossoms, are responsible for 80 percent of the total pollination that takes place every year. Photo by Jason Miller.

By this time, it was fall and my honey harvest was nonexistent. They produced just enough honey to winter them over. *Dummies* indicated that opening the hive once a week would not be too often, but after the hive is established, eight or nine thorough inspections each year would suffice. I think the latter stuck in my memory, because I didn't open the hive enough for simple feeding and cleaning.

My professional help came two to three times a month and the hives began to thrive, but these duties were more than I really wanted to take on, so I gave my hive to my professional beekeeper friend. He was trying to increase his hives, so he gladly took it and added another hive on my property. It has turned out to be a great deal. I get honey and great pollination, and he gets another hive. Sometimes he transports them to a farmer's field, but generally, they are here.

So, that's my unvarnished story. If you're considering adding bees to your property, here are my take-home thoughts.

- Beekeeping is a fun and interesting adventure that will help your garden and give you honey.
- It will require two or three days a month throughout the year, and will provide many opportunities to watch the bees work and grow.
- If you are allergic to bee stings, don't do it. If insects repulse you, don't do it. If you are busy forty to sixty hours a week, don't do it. If your lot is so small that you can walk it in three minutes, don't do it.
- If you have the time and a reasonably good-sized lot, consider doing it, especially if your lot is one acre or more.
- Before you decide one way or the other, contact the WSU Extension for advice or leads for more information.
- Contact the WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners to learn about the benefits of a beehive on your property, and find a beekeeper or apiary club whose members can help you get started
- Read *Beekeeping for Dummies* by Howland Blackiston and *ABC and XYZ of Bee Culture, 40th edition* by Roger A. Morse (originally by Amos Ives Root).

Honeybees have had a tough row to hoe, lately, especially with Colony Collapse Disorder devastating their hives across the U.S. Hopefully, some of you reading about my experiences will give beekeeping a try and help get our bee colonies back on track.