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BEE QUEENS

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Abstract (Abstract): The mysterious world of bees stung [Pam Burton]'s interest when she looked up the word "apiculture," checking its meaning and spelling, after hearing about the NASA Langley Apiculture Club. Curious, she attended meetings and read up on beekeeping for about a year. Then, she bought her first 3-pound "package" of bees, which typically arrive by mail from commercial apiaries, mostly in the South. Burton started beekeeping by the book, going the way many people do. Her hives consisted of two "deep" supers, or boxes, on the bottom serving as the brood chamber where the bees raise their young, and then "shallow" supers added to the top as the bees fill the frames inside with nectar and make it into honey. *Bees have two stomachs -one that handles digestion for their own needs, and a "honey stomach" that begins the enzymatic process that will turn nectar into honey. Without being carried back to the hive in a bee's honey stomach, nectar wouldn't become honey. Forager bees regurgitate the nectar upon returning to the hive, whereupon another worker takes it "upstairs" for storage, and begins the hydrating/dehydrating process with water and fanning that turns it into honey.

Full text: Pam Burton gets a little depressed during cold winter months.

Yet, when one of those fluky 50-degree days happens in mid-February, she looks out her window, smiling when she sees bees flying around.

"It gives me stamina to push through 'til spring," says Burton, 45, who lives in Gloucester.

The mysterious world of bees stung Burton's interest when she looked up the word "apiculture," checking its meaning and spelling, after hearing about the NASA Langley Apiculture Club. Curious, she attended meetings and read up on beekeeping for about a year. Then, she bought her first 3-pound "package" of bees, which typically arrive by mail from commercial apiaries, mostly in the South.

That Langley club is now called the Colonial Beekeepers Association with about 110 members, about 35 of them women.

Burton, club treasurer, keeps a "race" of the *apis mellifera* honey bee species know as Italian, which is basically a Western European bee. There were no honey bees in North America before colonists brought them here.

"Italians are good tempered and build up their numbers quickly in spring, so they tend to be good honey producers," she says.

"I expect to receive my first Carniolan queen bee sometime this month, raised for sale by the Ohio Beekeepers Association to benefit the Ohio State University Honeybee Lab, which lost buildings, records and equipment in a tornado last year.

"Carniolans are a variety of Italian bee but they originated in Yugoslavia and Austria and are grayish-black in color and popular in northern areas with hard winters.

"This queen probably will laugh at our Virginia winter!"

Once Burton gets that queen, she will start her third hive; her two hives contain about 80,000 bees.

Burton started beekeeping by the book, going the way many people do. Her hives consisted of two "deep" supers, or boxes, on the bottom serving as the brood chamber where the bees raise their young, and then "shallow" supers added to the top as the bees fill the frames inside with nectar and make it into honey.

"I discovered over time, though, that it's pretty hard for someone my size to lift that second deep off of the first -- with a large amount of honey in its outer frames, one of those boxes can weigh between 50 to 80 pounds," she says.

"So eventually I started keeping my bees in all shallow boxes - about five shallows for the brood chamber, and two or three shallows at the top for honey. It makes no difference to them, and it's easier for me to shift supers around when necessary. Some of our club members use all medium supers, which have frames deeper than a shallow but shorter than a deep."

In Newport News, Susan Lawlor wanted bees to help pollinate the vegetables she likes to grow. She keeps bees from local sources in a hive that's a starter colony of sorts, about half the size of a full-strength hive.

"I moved five years ago to a neighborhood with yards and gardens and noticed an almost complete absence of bees," she says.

"Vegetables in the garden weren't growing because the blossoms weren't getting pollinated. So I started looking into what was involved in beekeeping, how much time and space it would take and found it can be done on a very small scale in almost any location. I decided to give it a try.

To get started, she spent about \$500 for protective clothing, hive boxes, frames and tools. Ongoing expenses include buying sugar to make supplemental food and jars for the honey she extracts.

"I'm planning to expand to two full hives but that's really all I have room for."

Lawlor, 54, is also a member of the Colonial Beekeepers Association, which offers free classes, as well as the Virginia State Beekeeping Association.

"Joining a local beekeeping association is essential," she says.

"Beekeeping is an art as much as it is a science and being able to observe and ask questions is extremely helpful. As a group, the local beekeepers I've met are the friendliest and most helpful bunch of people I've ever known."

To help the bees, Lawlor grows borders of bee balm and leaves patches of clover in her yard.

"The best thing is just being able to watch them work every day," she says.

"It makes me happy to see the daily activity around the hive."

For Burton, beekeeping comes with several upsides.

It's good exercise - beekeepers in their 60s and 70s are some of the fittest people she knows.

"And you'll always have something to talk about at boring parties," she says.

"Unless you run into another beekeeper, in which case, you'll both bore everyone around you."

Plus, there's the delicious honey you harvest. Local honey is food that tastes like it was meant to taste, she contends. Commercially packaged honey processed by big packing houses is heated and filtered - think tasteless supermarket tomato - so there's little flavor left.

"You can't beat honey that's been made from local nectar, taken from the hive, run once or twice through a mesh filter that leaves all the vitamins and minerals, and a lot of the pollen, intact - then eaten," she says.

"It tastes like honey is supposed to taste."

POLLINATOR POINTERS

In recognition of June 20-26 as Pollinator Week in Virginia, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services encourages homes and businesses to incorporate plants that benefit pollinators in landscapes because pollination is an essential part of a healthy ecosystem, giving us food, plants and wildlife. Here are tips for attracting pollinators to flowering plants.

*Plant a variety of flowers that bloom different times of the year. Some insect pollinators are seen during brief spells in spring and summer but honey bees, bumble bees and many vertebrate pollinators are around throughout the growing season and into winter.

*Plant flowers in clumps rather than as singles or in rows. Clumping flowers increases the intensity of the fragrance and a pollinator's ability to locate it's origin, including those that only come out at night, such as moths and bats.

*Choose a variety of flower colors to attract a wide variety of pollinators; for example, butterflies like red, orange and yellow while hummingbirds prefer purple, red and fuchsia.

*Select as many native and nonhybrid plants as possible; many hybrid flowers have their pollen, nectar and fragrance bred out of them. To find the best, check the North American Pollinator Protection Campaign and the Pollinator Partnership at www.pollinator.org/guides.htm and enter you zip code for an area-specific guide.

*Flower shapes matter, too. Butterflies and honey bees like to land before feeding and usually prefer flat, open flowers. Pollinators with long beaks and tongues, such as hummingbirds, like tubular flowers. Find a guideline of flowers that appeal to different pollinators at www.pollinator.org/Resources/Pollinator_Syndromes.pdf.

*Provide or build nesting structures for pollinators. Bird and bat houses, shrubbery, compost and piles of fallen branches and brush provide harborage for many pollinators. Plans and tips for these structures are available through Virginia Cooperative Extension at www.ext.vt.edu.

*Never use pesticides or herbicides when pollinators are present or around a pollinator garden. Even organic pesticides can be potentially harmful. Herbicides can actually wipe out some of the most important food plants for pollinators.

BE A BEEKEEPER

*The Colonial Beekeepers Association is a group of beekeepers primarily from the Peninsula and Middle Peninsula. Meetings, free and open to the public, are held 7-9 p.m. on the third Tuesday each month (January-November) in the fellowship hall at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Ella Taylor Road, York County. See a "getting started tutorial" and other helpful information at colonialbeekeepers.com; call President Pete Ostrowski at 804-815-6535.

*Watch club members extract honey during McDonald Garden Center's Crepe Myrtle Festival July 23-25 at 1139 W. Pembroke Ave., Hampton.

*Best beekeeping reading material includes "Bee Culture" and "American Bee Journal," which cover practical beekeeping and bee research, according to Burton.

*Burton says the best bee plants in her yard include hollies and camellias, which bloom in early spring and help colony buildup, as well as blackberries, ligustrum, beautyberry, cherry and crabapple trees.

DID YOU KNOW?

*Honey never goes bad, so there's no need to refrigerate it; in fact, refrigerating it only speeds up the natural granulation process. If your honey looks cloudy and has crystallized, it hasn't spoiled - just put the container in a pot of warm water for 30 minutes or so and it will return to its liquid state.

*Bees have two stomachs -one that handles digestion for their own needs, and a "honey stomach" that begins the enzymatic process that will turn nectar into honey. Without being carried back to the hive in a bee's honey stomach, nectar wouldn't become honey. Forager bees regurgitate the nectar upon returning to the hive, whereupon another worker takes it "upstairs" for storage, and begins the hydrating/dehydrating process with water and fanning that turns it into honey.

- Beekeeper Pam Burton

ONLINE

*See a video of beekeeper Pam Burton at dailypress.com.

*Read more of the beekeepers interview at roomandyard.com/diggin.

*Apply for a Protect Pollinators license plate in Virginia at pollinatorplates.com.

Illustration

Photo (color) courtesy of Peter Ostrowski; Caption: Bees work the honeycombs in hives at the home of Peter Ostrowski, president of the Colonial Beekeepers Association. Staff photos (color) by JOE FUDGE
Beekeeper Pam Burton places the uncapped frames inside the extractor for the spinning. The process end with a half-full, 5-gallon bucket of freshly extracted honey. Beekeeper Pam Burton is placing one of the frames onto a holding stand after removing it from the hive. Burton is pulling out all the honey frames and then extracting honey. Photo (color) courtesy Susan Lawlor
Beekeeper Susan Lawlor, pictured at her home in Newport News, plans to expand to two full hives. She says it makes her happy to see the daily activity around the hive. Also, caring for

the bees is great exercise. Staff photo (color) by Joe Fudge Beekeeper Pam Burton is uncapping the bee's wax from the frames so the honey can be removed by the extractor.

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