

A honey of a lifestyle...
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Author: JULIANNE MUNN

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As winter slips slowly into spring, thousands of honeybees at the Bee Happy Apiary north of Crystal River are being pampered and encouraged to produce even more or the tiny pollinators before they visit the lush orange groves near Plant City.

William "Bill" Mashburn, a Florida native and former Belle Glade area rancher, says his bees are a bit testy during the cooler weather and are fed a diluted high fructose corn syrup, designed to fool the bees into thinking it's nectar.

Mashburn began bee-keeping in earnest in the early 1990's, after working for 20 years at the former Hollinswood Ranch north of Crystal River, though he said "he fooled around with bees" at the Belle Glade ranch.

Within the next two weeks, he will transport his 300 hives, which will average about 60,000 bees per hive, to the Plant City orange groves to ensure a bountiful supply of orange blossom honey.

"I keep them there about a month, until the blossoms are gone, and then put them in the watermelon fields for more pollination," he explained. Then it's back to his Crystal River farm.

He said he keeps the bees well fed in the winter so they will continue to generate new swarms before the trip south. "They eat about seven pounds of honey to make a comb full of wax," he noted, during a tour of his production sheds where a machine cuts the wax off the combs and a centrifugal separator "slings the honey off and into 55 gallon drums."

By simple definition honey is the substance made when the nectar and sweet deposits from plants are gathered, modified and stored in the honeycomb by honeybees. The term "pure honey" means a pure product that does not allow for the addition of any other substance.

One room is reserved for the huge drums, each containing 660 pounds of filtered honey, he pointed out from hives that each produce an average of 90 pounds of raw honey and sometimes up to 120 pounds each.

Early Florida beekeepers moved their colonies from one honey flow to another long before migratory beekeeping was practiced elsewhere, usually by boat according to the Florida Beekeepers Association.

Florida beekeeping is now almost totally migratory. Most bees in the state are moved from two to six times a year either interstate or intrastate. About half of Florida's bees move to northern states in the summer for pollination or honey production and pollinate everything from blueberries in Maine to almonds in California, says the FBA.

Mashburn says he sells his honey, bottled in attractive containers, throughout Citrus County and Central Florida, and even ships some to customers as far away as Ohio and the Carolinas. "There is one woman who buys five gallons at a time for cooking." He said.

He said he sold 7,200 pounds of his orange blossom variety in 2004, just part of the total amount, which also includes wildflower honey.

Is a beekeeper's job dangerous? Mashburn said he is often stung four to five times a day, but an allergic reaction in 1971 helped build a resistance to the been venom. "I'd rather be stung by a bee than a fire ant." He declared with a grin, "stings are soon gone, but fire ant's burn and itch for a long time."

Mashburn said the Bee Happy Apiary is actually owned by his wife, Shirley and he handles the working end of the partnership.

In addition to gathering and bottling the smooth, sweet honey, he occasionally makes honey-based wine for home use, including "mead" composed of orange blossom honey infused with cranberry nectar.

At the Mashburn home, honey is used to sweeten oatmeal and green tea, and he said one can assess the nutritional value like "comparing eating white bread to eating whole wheat bread."