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## Comb sweet comb



By Nancy Kennedy

In the book "The Secret Life of Bees," beekeeper August Boatwright tells the runaway Lily Owens, "Most people don't have any idea about all the complicated life going on inside a hive. Bees have a secret life we don't know anything about."

Perhaps the secret, which is not so secret to local beekeeper Bill Mashburn of Bee Happy Apiary north of Crystal River, is that it takes a lot of bees to make a lot of honey.

It's not yet spring and the bees at Bee Happy have had a tough winter. Because of the unusually cold temperatures, for the most part they've stayed inside their wooden hives, clustered together, keeping warm.

When the temperature rises they venture outside. Bees like to be busy. They're born to gather nectar and pollen and make honey so humans can smear it on their biscuits, make baklava and sweeten their tea.

"They actually make it for themselves and we steal it," Mashburn said. "They make honey and eat it."

The secret is to get the bees in a hive busy producing enough honey so what they don't need for themselves can be extracted for human consumption.

Mashburn said it takes about 1,000 trips to gather nectar and pollen from a flower for a bee to make a spoonful of honey.

This is the time of year Florida beekeepers start building up their hives. They do this by feeding the bees corn syrup. They do this by either putting a drip into the hive or, as Mashburn does, dumping a barrel of corn syrup into straw for the bees to crawl into.

The bees eat the corn syrup until flowers in the area start blooming.

"When you get a hive built up, there'll be about 60,000 bees," he said. "You have to have that combination of a strong hive and a good nectar flow."

Different nectar from different blooms creates different flavors of honey, such as clover, tupelo, wildflower and orange blossom.

But since there aren't any orange trees around here, we have to haul them south (to the orange groves) and leave them there for a while," Mashburn said. "The weather has a lot to do with how much nectar's in the trees, and that decides how much honey you make."

Mashburn started with 10 hives in 1993 and once had as many as 300.

A rancher for 30 years, he was working on a ranch south of Citrus County and "played around" with bees.

"They'd swarm on the trees and I'd catch them for my own use, just for fun," he said.

Then, when another ranch he worked on was sold, he decided he needed something to do and that harvesting honey might make a sweet occupation.

He sells honey through his Internet site ([www.beehappyhoney.net](http://www.beehappyhoney.net)) and at produce stands and health food stores locally and in surrounding counties.

Wayne Stilts, president of Nature Coast Beekeepers, said there are about 20 local beekeepers. He has four hives at his Hernando home.

"I just caught a swarm last Saturday," he said.

Stilts said he keeps his bees at his home rather than transport them to the orange groves.

"They get pollen from the citrus trees in the neighborhood and a few gardens and wildflowers in the area," he said.

As a result, the honey from his hives is a blend and varies in flavor and color.

### **It's good to be queen**

In a bee colony, there can only be one queen, and honeybee life revolves around her. Her job is to lay eggs — between 1,000 and 1,500 a day.

The other bees in the colony are either workers or drones. Worker bees, all female, gather nectar and pollen, feed the larvae and pupae as the fertilized eggs grow, secrete beeswax through their bodies, build intricate honeycomb cells and guard the hive.

Drone bees, all male, exist to mate with the queen — and die once they do.

In nature, bees make their own hives in hollowed-out trees, high on tree branches, under sheds, inside cinderblocks and anywhere else they see fit.

Beekeepers provide wooden boxes as hives, like a bee apartment complex. The ground floor is the brood box where they raise their young.

Each hive contains a number of frames in the upper "floors." The bees build their hexagonal cells on the frames out of wax. This is where the queen lays her eggs and where the workers make and store honey.

When the frames are full of honey, the bees put a coating of wax over it.

A natural bees' nest also has upper and lower chambers, for the same purposes.

Once the beekeeper wants to harvest the honey, the wax is sliced off (which can be used to make candles or any number of wax-related products) and the frames go in a centrifugal separator that slings the honey off to be stored in 55-gallon drums.

"It takes about 90 medium-size frames to make 600 pounds of honey; that's close to 50 gallons," Mashburn said.

He said beekeeping is time-consuming and hard work, and sometimes he gets stung. At one time he was highly allergic, but he's since built up a resistance to bee venom.

"The first thing I put honey in is my iced tea," he said. "Then I put it on my biscuits and my toast. It's good if you mix it in peanut butter.

"It's healthy," he said. "I've heard that eating local wildflower honey is good for people with allergies because it's from local flowers and you start to build up immunities from the local pollen, but I can't say that for sure."

### **DON'T "BEE" A STRANGER**

- Nature Coast Beekeepers meets at 10 a.m. each third Saturday at Victory Baptist Church, 5040 E. Shady Acres Drive, Inverness. For information, call Wayne Stilts at 344-9418.

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