



Steve Gentry of the Orinda and Moraga farmer's markets examines a frame from one of his backyard hives

Local Bee-Keepers Finish Bountiful Harvest

By Chris Lavin

Using a special wide-bladed knife, Steve Gentry slowly pried open the lid of one of the small beehives he keeps in his back yard in Orinda. Thousands of bees buzzed around his deck and head, and one settled on the back of his hand. He distracted them with another dose of smoke from his hand-held bellows, and they immediately started to eat as much honey as they could hold.

"They think it's a forest fire," he said. "They want to store up as much energy as possible."

He lifted one of the five frames out of the box and began to examine it for healthy patterns of egg-laying by the queen.

"This one looks good," he said, as the bees ate away on the frame he held in his hand. "You can see the eggs, the larva, the cells that have already been capped – you don't really need to see the queen. You can tell she's doing well by looking at all these eggs."

Dozens of bee-keepers throughout the Lamorinda area have reached the same conclusion in the past month, as they have harvested a much more bountiful crop than usual.

"It's been a really good year," said Patty Patton, assistant bee keeper to her husband Bill Thompson's hives in Canyon. "We got at least seven gallons" from their handful of hives.

Gentry has been a regular sight at the Orinda Farmer's Market for the past 10 years, and more recently has begun to

set up his honey table and demonstration bee hive at the Moraga Farmer's Market. He harvests between 3,000 and 4,000 pounds of honey a year from his various sites throughout the Lamorinda area, including his own back yard.

And according to Gentry, it's a growing hobby here. He has watched the membership in the Mt. Diablo Beekeepers Association grow from about 30 a decade ago to more than 130 paying members today. All are just now coming off their busy season of harvesting the honey produced from the spring's plethora of blooms, when bees are their busiest.

Sporting a Hawaiian-like shirt with a bee and "honey for sale" motif – Gentry found a tablecloth with the pattern and had five shirts made out of it – Gentry does little except talk bees, think of bees, work with bees, and help other people and educational institutions set up demonstration hives so that they, too, can keep bees and learn about bees.

"This is not a job, it's a passion," he says, which to anyone who talks to him for five minutes knows, is an unnecessary statement.

On a recent visit to the UC Botanical Gardens, where he was helping to scout out a good spot to put a demonstration hive, Gentry bent down and watched a honey bee plunder a lavender flower. He pointed out the heavy beads of purple pollen on the bee's knees.

"In the hive when the bees deposit their pollen, you can tell where they have

been," Gentry said. "You get layers of colors. With lavender you can smear some right across your hand and get a purple streak." Later, at his house, he used his pocket knife to cut the wall from a tiny cell in the honeycomb. Inside, layers less than 1/16 of an inch revealed purple, white, brown and rust-colored pollens.

One big advantage of consuming local honey, Gentry and other beekeepers say, is that it can help prevent allergies.

"It's like getting inoculated," Gentry said. The bees feed on local flowers, and the enzymes created in the honey-making process create a sort of vaccine, he said. If local honey is not available, honey from a similar ecosystem works too, he said.

One disadvantage is getting stung,

on occasion. "Thousands," Gentry answers when asked how many times he's been stung. "Hundreds of thousands, probably." Now he just looks at his watch and waits for 45 seconds to pass – "that's when the pain peaks," he says.

A phenomenon many people ask both Thompson and Gentry about is Colony Collapse Disorder, in which whole colonies of bees simply disappear with no sign of trouble, or even of dead bees.

"It's happening everywhere but with local bee keepers," Gentry said. "It's only the commercial hives. We're doing great."

Thompson agreed.

"We've had one of the best seasons ever," he said.

The Mt. Diablo Beekeepers Association meets the second Thursday of each month. The next meeting is July 12, and members are happy to help novices start out. For more information, call Gentry at 925-254-8063.

Where to Find Local Honey

Besides local farmer's markets, local honey is available for purchase at the following locations:

- Diablo Foods in Lafayette
- Open Sesame in Lafayette
- Whole Foods in Walnut Creek
- Whole Foods in San Ramon
- Casa Orinda serves home-collected honey on all of its fried chicken and biscuit orders



A closeup of one of Gentry's hives

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