

Solid Gold State's Hives Yield Honey Of Many Colors And Tastes

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When Becky and Ted Jones got married 30 years ago, their wedding gifts included towels, sheets, china and a beehive.

A beehive?

“I thought it was a little strange at the time,” Becky says.

But they didn't get rid of it. They decided to learn a little bit about bees. And eight or nine years ago, they decided it was a little strange that they didn't have more beehives. Now the Joneses have more than 200 hives at a variety of locations all over Connecticut, including Farmington, where they live on Wolf Pit Road. They are among 508 beekeepers in Connecticut who harvest honey for fun and, sometimes, profit.

The product of their labor is sold at roadside stands, farmers' markets, some supermarkets and health-food stores throughout Connecticut. As any beekeeper will tell you, however, the honey is only one of the reasons they do what they do.

“Bees are basically the foundation of our food source,” says Becky Jones. “If not for the pollination the bees do, we would not have three-quarters of our food. When I go to schools, I show them one perfect apple and 12 that are misshapen. The perfect one is the one that was pollinated properly. And now that most wild bees are gone, you need beekeepers, otherwise you would not have any pollination.”

Many of the beekeepers in the state are hobbyists, meaning they have maybe a couple or a dozen hives. “But at least that's helping out their own neighborhood, even if I have one hive or two hives,” says Jones. “The honey is strictly a surplus.”

A little of this, a little of that

That surplus, when it comes to Connecticut, is usually wildflower honey. Because there are no large tracts being farmed in the state, most beekeepers produce honey that is derived from a variety of sources. Occasionally you might find pumpkin honey or blueberry honey, but most bees in Connecticut take a little of this and a little of that as they forage for nectar over a range of about 3 ½ miles.

Many beekeepers in Connecticut are particularly fond of the honey that comes from black Locust trees. The honey from bees that visit these trees is light colored and has a delicate taste. “It's almost water white,” says Norman Farmer, who has been in the bee business for 38 years and, with more than 550 hives, is the largest producer of honey in the state.

Farmer notes that Black locust trees are a fairly new species in Connecticut. He says the seeds for the trees floated down the swollen rivers during the floods of 1957 from Vermont and New Hampshire. "The river was high and the banks were about 100 feet from where they usually are," he says. "The seeds got spread along, and when the river went down, they blossomed where they were planted."

Another source of nectar for Connecticut honeybees is loosestrife, a tall herb with long slender leaves and purple flowers. The honey produced from bees that visit loosestrife has a heavy, almost greenish tinge.

"If you look at it when its uncapped, it looks a little like brand new motor oil," says Farmer. He says that loosestrife, too, is considered an invasive species. "Some people are fighting it," he says. "Not me, I love it. My bees love them and they make good honey. When you think about it, we as people are invasive too. We moved in here. So what if something else does?"

The honey from black Locust trees and the loosestrife is combined with that from other sources in Connecticut, including sumac, the tulip poplar, dandelions, raspberry bushes, pussy willow, Japanese knotweed, thistle, honeysuckle, the sweet pepper bush, clover and goldenrod.

"You end up with all these different honeys," says Vincent Kay, who produces Swords into Plowshares honey from New Haven. "It all goes into what is produced. Whatever the bees produce that year—that is what you get. It absolutely varies from year to year. You'll end up with different colors, different flavors."

Combining deadly German logic with Eastern mysticism

Kay is one of the largest producers of honey in the state, with about 400 hives in Bethany, Woodbridge, Madison, Killingworth, Guilford and Fisher's Island, among other locations. Like many beekeepers, he supplements the income he gets from honey by renting his bees out to places like Bishop's Orchards to pollinate crops. He has been a beekeeper for about 17 years, and he took right to it.

"I always wanted to make a living with something that had to do with nature and in a state like Connecticut, that can be difficult," he says. "There's a lot of detail in beekeeping. It is a combination of a deadly German logic and a kind of Eastern mysticism. I enjoy that."

Kay says Connecticut beekeeping has changed over the years, particularly with the introduction of the bee mite, which can kill bees if left unchecked. He, like other beekeepers, has to spend money now on chemicals to fight the mites. But he says the rewards of beekeeping outweigh the frustrations.

He says gathering the honey from the hives can be an intense experience. "You tip the bee box up and the bee blower blows the bees out without hurting them. That also blows

the smell of honey around the yard. With the smell of honey, all the bees in all the hives come barreling out. It's like 'who is taking our honey?' It's like sharks in water around blood. One big cloud of bees."

Remain calm, work quickly, wear a full suit

At one of his bee yards in Woodbridge, he has 100 hives with about 120,000 bees per hive. By the time he drives away, his Chevy truck is one big cloud of bees. "There are bees inside, outside. They get caught in the air filter. They get caught in the muffler. You have to remain calm and work quickly. And wear a full suit."

Even when those precautions are taken, certain bees can sometimes be tremendously aggressive. One Connecticut hobbyist, a beekeeper named Ernest Jennings, had an aggressive swarm of honeybees inhabit one of his three hives in Franklin. Some beekeepers kill aggressive bees that sting them, but Jennings was not that kind of beekeeper.

"Some beekeepers would have put them down, but most beekeepers try to live with it. Bees are a precious thing," says Louis A. Magnarelli, who has been the state entomologist for 27 years. "It was an aggressive hive. What happened was atypical."

What happened was that Jennings went to check his hives in late August, they attacked him, and chased him a quarter-mile back to the house, where Jennings collapsed and died from heart failure. "It was one of those things. The whole thing was very unfortunate," says Magnarelli. He said there was any number of reasons a swarm of bees might turn aggressive. "It could have been something that was going on in the hive. The social structure could have been changing. If the queen gets old. If the bees get agitated. The food supply gets low this time of year. It could have been any one of those things," he said. The complexity of beekeeping is, in fact, what keeps many beekeepers enthralled with their work.

You tell people you play with bees, they look at you funny

"It's fascinating. It always has been," says Rollin J. Hannan Jr., who works about 300 hives. Hannan, of Southbury, does beekeeping as a sideline. But his aim is to go commercial. At 27 years old, he has been involved with beekeeping for more than half his life, starting when he was 12.

"The social life of bees is really interesting. They all work for a common goal. The last job of their life is to collect pollen and honey. And to defend the hive," he says. He adds that collecting the honey is what he loves best about beekeeping. "When you're in a hive, all you hear is buzzing. You don't think about anything else. When you mess up, you get stung. When you're doing your bees, you don't think about too many other things in your life."

Still, he says, there are a lot of people who just don't get it.

“We're different, that's for sure,” he says of beekeepers. “Most people don't like working with stuff that stings you. You tell people you play with bees, they look at you funny.”

Who cares? says Farmer. It beats working at Pratt & Whitney, raising cattle or raising gladiolas, all of which he has done.

“I'm my own boss. I work close to nature. I love what I do. I'm a steward of my own blessings,” he says. “I work close to God. I like that.”