Things Keep Buzzing At Honey Crest Farm

Stewart Mathias was recently named Pennsylvania Beekeeper of the Year. Mathias has long been involved in numerous aspects of the beekeeping and honey industry. He is known for his dedication and extensive volunteer work in teaching students the intricacies of beekeeeping.

Honey and beeswax is labeled Honey Crest Farm.

LOU ANN GOOD
Lancaster Farming Staff

HUMMELSTOWN (Dauphin Co.) — More than bees are buzzing at Honey Crest Farm.

It's the place where Stewart Mathias keeps experimenting and finding more projects related to beekeeping. For his dedication with the Capitol Region Beekeeping Association and his extensive promotional work, Mathias was recently received the Pennsylvania Beekeeper of the Year Award.

Mathias maintains 42 hives on and nearby his Hummelstown property. His basement contains all the equipment needed for processing the honey he markets under the label Honey Crest Farm.

"I got into bees because I read that comb honey helps asthma," Mathias said.

He no longer has asthma. "Whether it was the honey or outgrowing it, I don't know," Mathias said.

What he does know is that the hobby he began in 1965 continues to fascinate him.

Bees collect pollen on their legs as they sip nectar from the flowers. When they return to their hives, the bees regurgitate the liquid into cells in the honeycomb, where it is stored to provide food for larvae and themselves.

That's the abbreviated explanation. There's a lot more to know about beekeeping. In recent years, the honeybee industry has faced devastating losses from a mite invasion.

Two years ago, Mathias lost 50 percent of his hives. Bees are important pollinators of crops such as soybeans, sunflowers, fruits, and many other plants.

Beekeeping as an ancient branch of agriculture, and wild bees were responsible with pollinating crops. But the spread of parasitic mites has created a bee deficit.

Maintained colonies in wooden hives help provide bees to pollinate an estimated 65 million acres in the U.S.

Mites have plagued beekeepers for years. The mite problem has discouraged many people from continuing beekeeping. But Mathias is optimistic. He believes scientific research is on the brink of eradicating the plague.

"There's a new Russian queen bee that will be released to some beekeepers," Mathias said. The Russian queen shows resistance to the mite. However, it is available on a very limited basis this year and Mathias knows he won't be on the receiving end for awhile.

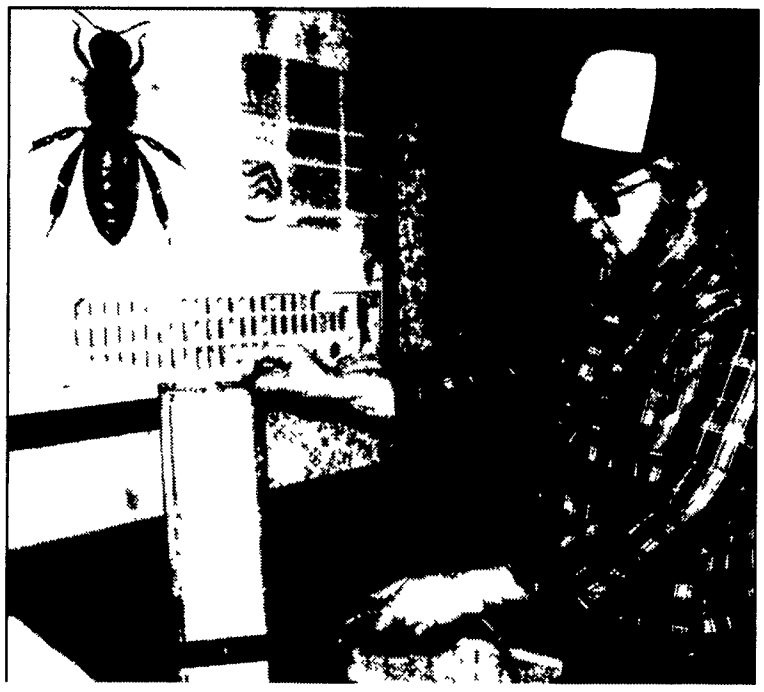
Mathias has his eye set on obtaining formic acid, a chemical that shows promise in eradicating mites.

Because Apistan has been used for the past 11 years, some resistance appears to have built up in the bees.

"We don't use the same crop pesticides over and over so we shouldn't expect to be able to use the same chemical to combat mites," Mathias said.

Chemicals can only be applied after the last honey is pulled off the hives before winter.

"I give up some of my fall crop in order to apply the treatment before cold weather sets in," he said.



Uncapping honey exposes every cell of honey. After extracting, the honey is placed in an extractor where it is quickly spun and placed in a holding tank for bottling.

This enables the bees to have more honey to remain healthier during winter months.

Mathias had heard about beekeeping from his brother-in-law who lives in Bloomsburg. After taking a short course offered by Delaware Valley College, Mathias got the basics down pat.

When Mathias first began beekeeping, he worked for H.B. Reese Candy Company. After 37 years, he retired. But he keeps busier than ever managing the 12 acres on his property, where he incorporated a forestry plan.

The purpose of enrolling in the Forest Stewardship Program is to return the land to nature. A 10-year-plan has been designed for his acreage. In the three years of plan participation, Mathias has built fence rows, brush piles, and planted trees. Not only is this beneficial to what is typically considered wildlife but also bees.

Wildlife is sometimes more plentiful on his property than desired. Skunks, redtail hawks and deer have played havoc with his efforts to raise Bobwhite quail. The first year he planted sunflowers to sell, the deer ate them all.

To protect his vegetable and flower garden, Mathias needed to surround it with an electric fence.

"I plant two fields, one with game mix, which includes wild flowers for the birds, and one for my own use," Mathias said.

Flowers and trees are planted specifically for the bees. Some of the bees' favorites are yellow sweet clover, orchard trees, basswood trees, and lavender.

Mathias got into raising flowers for wholesale the year that he planted broom corn for his own curiosity.

The crop was so plentiful, Mathias loaded up his pickup truck with broom corn.

"I went from one end of Hershey to the other giving away free broom corn to whatever florist who wanted it," Mathias said.

Since that contact, florists call him and ask him to grow select items for him. Some of the most often asked for plants are delphiniums, yarrows, and curly willow. Upon request, he's also forcing pear and cherry blossoms, which florists like to use as filler for large arrangements

A bucketful of the blossoms took two weeks to bloom after he brought them inside and sat them in a sunny spot in the family room.

Mathias sees marketing potential in forcing pear and cherry blossoms. He needs to prune the fruit trees anyway, and if he can sell what he normally throws away — that's profitable.

Despite many years of studying bees both in the book and in nature, Mathias continues to find surprising behavior of the insects.

Recently he noticed a heavy covering of bees at the bird feeders on his property. Upon closer inspection, he saw that the bees were consuming the dextrose released from the cracked corn in the feeder. Now Mathias puts out trays of cracked corn for the bees. After they feed on the sticky dextrose, Mathias throws the leftover corn to the birds, who seem to be just as pleased with it.

This year, another surprise surfaced in the bee world, Mathias found bees feeding on broccoli heads as late as January.

Last year, he had noticed bees transporting honey on Dec. 16. Curious to know the source, Mathias traced the source to some broccoli that had been left stand in the fields. Broccoli withstands frost and had forms yellow flower heads, where the bees ingested the nectar and pollen.

Mathias' beekeeping passion is being passed on to his children and grandchildren. Daughter Jill (now Clark), a former Pennsylvania Honey Queen and American (national) princess, has established a career in the industry. She is director of marketing and technical services for Dutch Gold.

"She sells honey by the tanker load," Mathias said. Clark is also the treasurer of the National Honey Board.

Mathias is confident his two grandsons, two and four years old, will carry on the beekeeping interest.

"The 4-year-old already gave a beekeeping presentation at his nursery school," Mathias said.

A son, Jeffrey, lives in New Mexico. Although he is no longer in beekeeping, a wall

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Department Of Agriculture Requires Honey Inspection

Due to the value of bees as pollinators of agricultural crops, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture conducts a bee inspection program. Seasonal inspectors work throughout the state contacting beekeepers and checking their bees for diseases and parasites.

When problems are found, the inspector will provide appropriate recommendations to treat the problem. To help the bee inspectors locate apiaries, all beekeepers are required by law to register their bees with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. A $10 fee is required to register any number of apiaries and is valid for a two-year period.

Any questions about bee diseases, registration or inspection can be directed to Jim Steinhauer, chief apiary inspector, PDA, Bureau of Plant Industry, 2301 N. Cameron St., Harrisburg, PA. Call (717) 772-5225.