

On The Farm With Honey Queen Renee Blatt

LOU ANN GOOD

Lancaster Farming Staff

JONESTOWN (Lebanon Co.)

— "She's a go-getter. Don't tell her she can't do something, she'll prove you wrong every time. She's an overachiever," said Steven Blatt about the Pennsylvania Honey Queen.

He ought to know. He is the father of Pennsylvania Queen Renee Blatt.

Typical of Renee's perseverance is the story of how she got into raising bees. After reading about beekeeping in an elementary reading program, Renee was fascinated and wanted to become a beekeeper.

Her parents were skeptical. They had no experience with the commodity and tried to discourage her.

At age 17, Renee found a website about bees and resources for ordering supplies. The investment was a bit mind boggling, but Renee heard that her Uncle Bruce had raised bees many years ago. She contacted him and he gave her the wooden beehives stored in his barn. Over the years, the wooden boxes had deteriorated. No problem to Renee. With hammer, nails, and paint, she was ready for business.

She ordered bees and soon had three hives operating.

Unfortunately, the queen bee died in one hive. Bees in the other hive swarmed and disappeared. The other hive did well for the season but didn't survive the winter.

Renee searched written materials for insight on how to turn the hives into thriving colonies. That was when she noticed an article in "Lancaster Farming," about a short course in beekeeping.

Renee took the course and through that was introduced to the Pennsylvania Beekeepers Association.

"For anyone interested in beekeeper, I recommend joining a local beekeeping association. You can join for a \$5 membership," Renee said. She is a member of the Capital Area Beekeepers Association and the Pennsylvania State Beekeepers Association.

"Members have incredible knowledge and are willing to share everything about bees, and how to deal with the predators and diseases that threaten them."

Renee was thrilled with the knowledge that enabled her to start a thriving bee colony.



At the state farm show, Renee uncaps honey during a beekeeping demonstration.

"You don't get rich, but it's fascinating and I love to do it," Renee said of beekeeping.

She estimates that she has invested about \$1,000 in supplies.

"It takes money to make money," Renee said of her plans to expand her hobby. She would like to collect pollen to sell, which is in demand to treat people with allergies.

She said that many people are surprised to learn that bees are needed to pollinate about two-thirds of the world's food supply.

Without bees, garden produce suffers.

"Crooked pumpkins are the result of not being pollinated by bees," she said.

In demonstrations, Renee shows several varieties of honey in regular, comb, flavored, and chunked forms. Her favorite are the flavored honey such as blueberry and raspberry. For cooking, she prefers orange blossom and clover honey.

Renee was crowned Pennsylvania Honey Queen in Nov. 1999 at the Beekeepers association's convention in Lewisburg. Her state reign is for one year, and qualifies her to compete for the national honey queen crown at the national association to be conducted in San Diego, Jan. 2001.

Since her coronation, she has appeared on television and been interviewed on talk radio. She represented the apary industry at the Farm Show Agriculture 2000 banquet. She helped with the honey extracting demonstration conducted in the food pantry. To uncap honey, Renee used a hot knife to slide down over the honey comb, which melts the wax and allows liquid honey to be poured into extractor to drain and strain before putting into jars.

As state queen Renee receives a \$600 scholarship and generous travel expenses. She sets up her own appointments for most of the promotions. Her favorite promotions are in schools. Renee has lots of letters from students who wrote how their attitude towards bees were changed by her visit.

"People treat the Honey Queen like a celebrity," Renee said of the attention a crown garners. At the Farm Show and other events, Renee hands out stickers with the words, "Honey, I love you."

"If a kid has a Winnie the Pooh shirt on, I ask, 'Do you know what Pooh likes to eat?'" Renee said as she pastes a honey sticker on the child's shirt.

With some tips and instruction from association members, Renee now has six thriving colonies.

Some of the steps necessary to produce a healthy hive include putting mite strips in the hive for the winter.

Pests and predators in the Lebanon County area include skunks and mice, but in the northwestern part of the state, it's bears that try to steal honey.

Recently one of Renee's friends discovered a bee swarm hanging on a sapling and called Renee, who collected the bees, keeping them intact to fill a

hive. She did it all without suffering any bee stings or other problems.

Many people are terrified of bees. An unfounded fear according to Renee. When working with the hive, Renee said that the secret to prevent getting stung is to remain calm and use slow deliberate movements when working with the hives. She wears bee garb that includes a veil, but prefers not to use gloves.

This spring she moved all her bees to a new spot when her dad needed to spray the alfalfa field. She was pleased that the transfer went well.

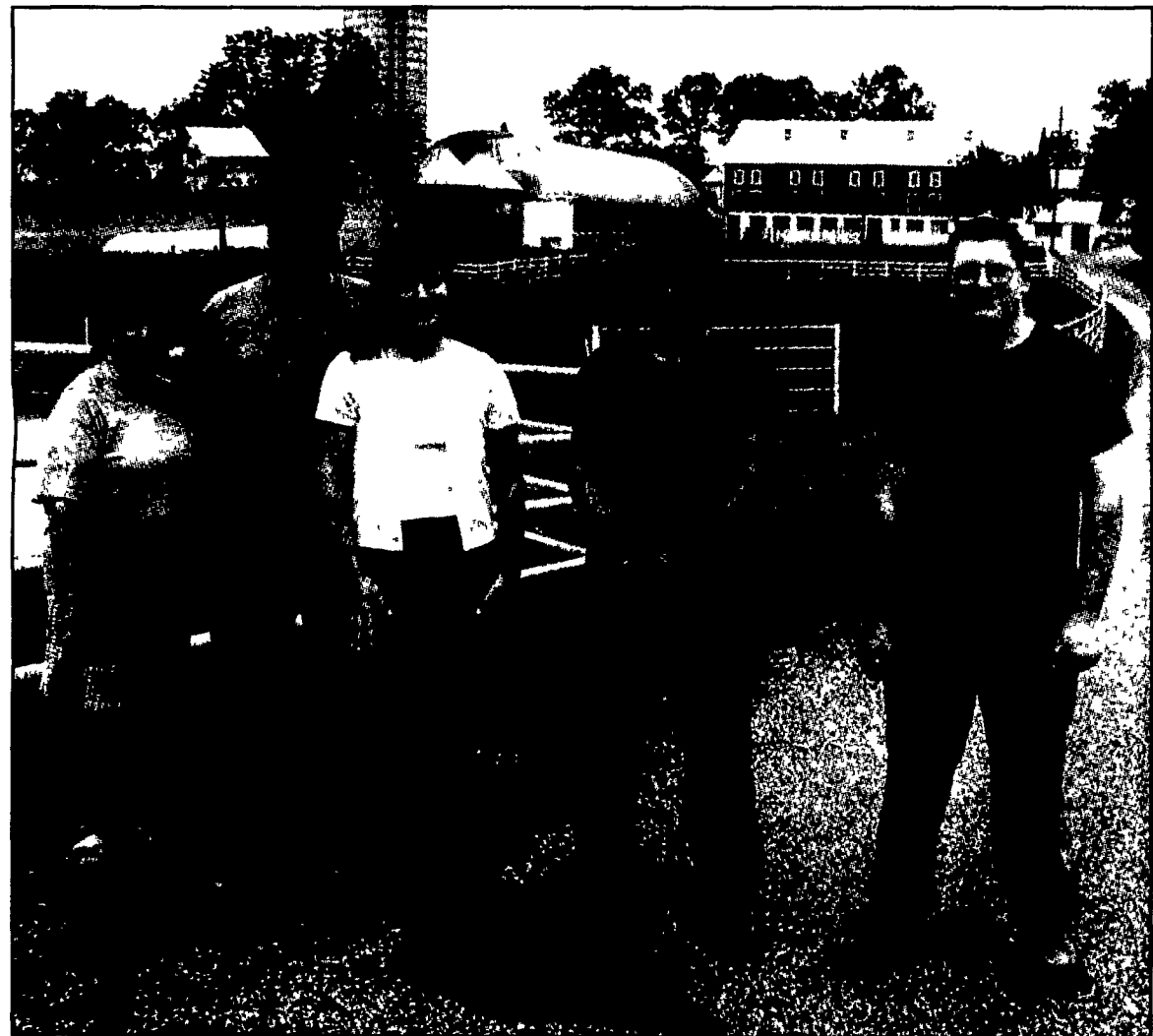
"It's exciting to read something in books about bees or hear another beekeeper share an experience and then watch it happen to your own hives.

When time permits, Renee loves to sit and watch bees flying in out of her hives. She can determine what the bees are feeding on by observing the direction they return to the hives. Recently a neighboring alfalfa

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Pennsylvania Honey Queen Renee Blatt is enthusiastic about all forms of agriculture including raising her own corn.



Pennsylvania State Honey Queen Renee Blatt with parents Steven and Jennifer Blatt, and brothers, Andrew, 17, and Joseph, 15, and the dog named Bear.



The Blatt family raises and mixes feed for both their hog and their dairy operation. Blatt is one of the few independent hog farmers in the area.

