

# Township duo get a buzz out of bees

Ben Prchal pulls on a white head-to-ankle jumpsuit and gloves, while John Wasser stuffs wisps of dried grass into a metal can and sets it afire. Then Wasser stands back at a safe distance while Prchal waves the smoking can over a stack of boxes lined up against the back wall of Wasser's barn.

"Calms 'em down," explains Wasser.

He was talking about the thousands of honey bees clustered in the boxes. It was time for Prchal to pull off the lids and see how they were doing.

Prchal, 17, and Wasser, his neighbor across Myeron Road, have been keeping bees together for four years, ever since Prchal was 13 and Wasser decided he wanted a project for the two friends to do together.

"He called me up one night and said, 'Hey, want some bees?'" Prchal recalls.

The two are foursquare in the center of a resurgence of small-scale, backyard beekeeping, says Jim Kloek. He runs a beekeeping supply business called Nature's Nectar out of his home on Manning Avenue and is the one who supplies Wasser and Prchal with their bees and equipment.

Kloek has been keeping bees for 18 years ("Ever since my wife gave me some bees for Christmas.") and has had the bee supply business for 10 years. In the past few years, he has seen interest in beekeeping skyrocket.

His business has been busy, and a two-day class for beginning beekeepers at the University of Minnesota has 250 students and a waiting list of 150.

"It's hot right now," Kloek says. "Bees have been in the news lately, and I think there's a genuine interest in people wanting to help out."

He's referring to colony collapse disorder, the term for the recent mysterious dying off of multitudes of honey bees. Although some experts point to the role of pesticides and habitat changes, scientists are not sure of the cause.

But the consequences of CCD can be dire, since about one-third of the U.S. food supply relies on honeybees for pollination.

Kloek says the other reason that backyard beekeeping is suddenly popular, is that "you're stepping back in time. It's an old traditional pastime. And the more people find out about bees, the more they realize that bees are really cool."

That's certainly true of Wasser and Prchal.

"They are just so fascinating," says Wasser, who kept bees for a time when he lived in Washington state.

His 10 acres in the township was the perfect site for a hive, so he recruited Prchal, who is now a junior at St. Croix Lutheran High School in West St. Paul.

Most years, they order two pounds of bees from Kloek, which is a container with a queen bee in the center. They put the bees in a box with frames that the bees will use to hold the honey they produce.

As the queen breeds more bees and they all start to produce honey, it's important to add more boxes to the stack to expand the space and keep the bees from feeling crowded. If not, the dreaded "swarm" might happen, which is when the entire colony of bees loads up on honey and abandons the hive in a dense cluster with the queen in its center.

By happenstance, two swarms landed on Wasser's farm, once on a fencepost and another up in a tree. So Prchal suited up and captured the swarms to create a new hive alongside the existing one.

He admits it was "pretty weird" to plunge his gloved hand into the thick of the swarm to grab fistfuls of bees he then dropped into a bucket. The maneuver was possible only because honey-glutted bees are torpid. Just one thing gave him pause. "I looked down and realized some skin was showing between my glove and suit. I covered it up really fast."

To the inevitable question about bee stings, Prchal admits that, yes, he sometimes gets stung. But he shrugs it off. It doesn't happen often, and he has learned the proper way to remove the stinger. Never pull it straight up, which instantly drives all the poison straight down. Instead, flick it to the side to get it out.

Unlike most of Kloek's customers, Wasser and Prchal usually do not overwinter their queen, choosing instead to purchase a new set of bees each spring. Keeping the queen alive requires the beekeeper to either allow the hive to retain a frame and a half of honey to sustain the bees throughout the winter or tend them frequently with a sugar water concoction.

They tried overwintering once, but decided it was too much hassle. Some winters are easier than others to overwinter queens, Kloek says. "It needs to be cold when it's supposed to be cold and warm when it's supposed to be warm," he says. This past winter was a very good winter for that.

Kloek, who maintains 75 hives himself, sells packages of bees in two- or three-pound containers. A three-pound package costs \$75 and contains about 7,500 bees. By early July the hive could easily contain 50,000 bees. The more bees, the more honey.

The boxes to hold the bees cost about \$220 and a full protective suit like the one Prchal wears costs \$75.

The only other thing that's required for beekeeping is space. But even city residents in Minneapolis and St. Paul are allowed to keep bees. Kloek usually recommends that people have at least two acres, which allows them to keep the bees away from their neighbors.

Wasser and Prchal try to be good neighbors by not purchasing strains of bees known to be particularly aggressive. The more aggressive the bees, the more honey they produce. But Wasser and Prchal are just

in it for the fun and mental stimulation. “We just give the honey away,” says Wasser.

Obstacles to beekeeping? It sounds trite, but beware of bears. One spring, Wasser says he was visited by a bear—twice—before he thought to put up an electric fence. The bear wrecked the hive, but that was the last time one bothered the bees.

***For more information***

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