The Buzzz

The Monthly Newsletter of the Gilroy Beekeepers Association

Volume X **October 2013**

In this issue

Getting to Know Each Other!

by Vicki Basham

This month, we're putting Master Gardner Randy Fox in the spotlight. Randy and his wife, Sandi , also a Master Gardner, live in San Martin. Randy is the proud keeper of three colonies that he keeps in his beautiful, lush backyard. The bees in Randy's colonies don't have to go far for food; Randy grows several fruit trees, lots of flowers and a large variety of vegetables.

When asked why he keeps bee, Randy said, "I've always been fascinated with nature and with pollinators, and I wanted to help with the problems pollinators have. And besides, I like honey!" The bees probably enjoy the fact that the National Wildlife Federation has recently declared Randy's home a certified Backyard Wildlife Habitat.

Randy got his first hive in 2011, but he lost that hive to an ant invasion. He decided to try again in 2012 with two more hives that he got from Wayne Pitts, president of our Gilroy guild. Wayne has also been acting as a mentor, helping Randy with inspections and problem solving. This time, Randy put the new hives on stands up off the ground to protect the hives from ants. One of the hives was so successful that he decided to do a split, bringing his current hive count to three. All three colonies appear to be doing quite well. Eventually, he would like to have about four more hives in his backyard apiary.

Randy doesn't like to get into the hives very often. He believes that the "less you fiddle around with them, the less damage you probably do." He says, "If it ain't broke, don't break it!"

Randy thinks that joining a guild or bee club is a great idea for beginners. "I can't emphasize that enough. It's the fastest way to learn and a good way to network with other beekeepers."

When asked what Randy's most memorable moment in beekeeping was, he quickly recalled a time when he and Wayne took a trip to one of bydistance away as Wayne moved bees from

Langstroth hives into a top bar hive. After Wayne had emptied two or three hives, the two of them were suddenly surrounded by a huge cloud of very angry bees. Wayne was fine; he was wearing a bee suit, but Randy didn't have a suit on and was soon covered with bees and ended up getting a painful sting in the eye.

He also remembers a time when he was entertaining Wayne and other guests in his backyard, and he wanted to show them his hives. He dressed in his bee suit and removed the top but accidentally brushed it over the hive, rather than lifting it off the top. In doing so, he also brushed off a lot of very angry bees that had been clinging to that hive top. Before he knew it, he was again covered with bees and had seven stings on his hand as a result.

Luckily, he laughs about both incidents now, and it hasn't deterred his interest in bees one bit!

Monthly Column

Smokin'

by Dave Stocks

I recently went to the doctor for a physical. During the doc's interrogation into my bad habits, he asked, "Do you smoke?"

I casually replied, "Well yeah, I'm a beekeeper!"

With a look of disbelief at my answer, he asked "Why?"

My reply was quick. "Well," I said," that's what beekeepers do!" That's true, that's what beekeepers do; they smoke their bees before entering the hive.. But why? Several answers jumped into my mind as I attempted to answer the question. First, I thought, I smoke the bees because my first teacher told me that's what you do. I tried not doing it, and the results were memorable! Not long afterwards, someone explained that the smoke caused the bees to gorge themselves on honey, and with their bellies full, they couldn't bend over to sting you. No one likes to get stung; bring on the smoke.

Now that I've kept bees for awhile, I've learned there is much more to smoke than a few puffs in the hive. What effect does the smoke really have on the bees? Is the smoker properly lit? Am I burning the correct materials? Am I using the smoker correctly considering the bees and their (and my) surroundings?

Let's start with the effect of smoke on bees. Yes, when exposed to smoke bees do gorge themselves, and yes, with full bellies, it is more difficult for them to sting. However, this is not why we smoke. Since fire was discovered eons ago, man has learned that it can be both his friend and his enemy. Most other creatures in nature see it only as an enemy. To the bee, smoke is the warning signal of an approaching fire: one that threatens the bees' hive. Their first inclination is to gorge themselves with honey in preparation for leaving the hive. With their minds set on the survival of their colony, they are not interested in an intrusion by the beekeeper. Observations have shown worker bees with their heads stuck in previously capped honey when exposed to smoke. As a side note, this is important to remember when smoking supers used for honey comb. All those little holes won't help the product!

The second effect of smoke on the hive involves the disruption of the bees' ability to communicate. Unlike humans, invertebrates, including bees, communicate with chemical messengers called pheromones. Pheromones are excreted by glands within the body. However, unlike hormones which only affect the individual, pheromones are secreted to the exterior. In the honey bee, pheromones can be divided into two groups. The first are those that work inside the hive. Here the bees are relatively protected and are mainly interested with the long term maintenance of order. The second group are those that act only outside the hive where the need for action is immediate. This is the group of pheromones we attempt to target by the use of smoke. As the beekeeper approaches the hive, the guard bees alert the rest of the hive of the approaching danger. The pheromone released is essentially a "call to arms" for the rest of the hive. With the use of smoke, the beekeeper can mask the alarm pheromone and enter the hive without the entire colony coming to the hive's defense.

A third reason for smoking has a more "grass roots" foundation. Researchers visiting beekeepers in Mexico found them using smoke as a means of varroa mite control. The beekeepers were using creosote, a plant with a high oil content, as smoker fuel. Dr. Frank Eischen of the USDA-ARS Honey Bee Research

Lab in Weslaco, Texas conducted further research. The results indicated that smoke causes the varroa to fall from their bee host. The exact mechanism by which this happens is not completely understood, nor are the long term effects to the bees. It does appear that the type of plant matter used is important. Plants with a high oil content are most effective. In addition to creosote, black walnut, cedar and grapefruit have shown some success. In our area where these plants may not be readily available, eucalyptus and chamise, a native plant, may meet the requirements. Pure tobacco may also work. However, from personal experience, smoking a cigar in lieu of using a smoker, has little effect on the bees. This does not hold true for the beekeeper!!

So what do we use for smoker fuel? We've already discussed the possibility of certain plant materials having a positive effect on varroa mite control . However, the feasibility of using these on a regular basis may be limited. There is an almost endless list of materials to use. As long as it burns and is not toxic to the bees or beekeeper, it can probably be used as smoker fuel. I have used pine needles for years. I have a large pine in my backyard that produces more than a constant supply. Others I know use redwood needles because that's what they have available. Burlap is an old stand-by. When choosing a fuel, the only other limiting factor is the beekeeper's approach to beekeeping in general. If you are using an "organic" approach, you will not be able to use fuels such as newspaper or burlap. A final word, no matter what you chose to use as a fuel. Have enough on hand to finish the job. Nothing is worse than being half way through your hive inspection and having a bunch of angry bees!

We've discussed why we want to smoke and some choices of what to use as fuel. Let's talk about how to use the smoker. First of all, and most important of all, we only want to create the illusion that the hive is threatened by fire. We don't want to actually burn the hive, the other hives in the yard or the surrounding landscape. Fire burns more than the fuel in the smoker. We must always be diligent and acutely aware of our surroundings. Hives sitting in dry grass on a windy day should not be smoked! If the location of your bee yard dictates, you should always have a means of suppressing an accidental fire. This would include carrying a shovel or hoe and some type of extinguisher, whether it be water or chemical. After thirty-five years as a firefighter, you would be surprised how often these simple things are forgotten!!!

When using the smoker, we want to apply smoke to the hive, not heat. Although difficult to describe in words, we want "cool" smoke. Cool smoke will exit the smoker in thick white clouds and will feel cool to the touch. Hot, thin, gray smoke is indicative of the smoke you would experience upon lighting the smoker or a smoker that has consumed almost all of its fuel. In both cases it is likely that you will experience sparks or flame emitting from the smoker. In addition to the danger to yourself, the bees and your surroundings, nothing will agitate the bees more quickly, obviously defeating the whole purpose of smoking. If you do feel your smoker is burning too hot, you can place a wad of green grass or other plant material on top of the smoldering fuel. This will cool the smoke better, achieving your desired quality. We also need to briefly discuss how much smoke to use. Whereas for mite control, a hive needs to be smoked for up to a minute, this is way too much for hive inspections. Too much unnecessary smoke can be detrimental to both the bees and the beekeeper. To put it simply, smoke the bees enough to achieve your objective. If you have smoked and the bees remain agitated, smoke a little more. If the hive becomes hazy before your eyes, you probably have enough.

Well, hopefully this has offered some insight into smoking your bees. Now I have to get back to my doctor's appointment. He's probably going to tell me my cholesterol is too high!!

Message From The President

Beekeeping: The road goes on forever and learning never ends

My first harvest

I joined the GBA at the second meeting of the Association in 1997. By the spring of 1998 Jim had me up and running with two swarms. I was now on the beekeeping road that never ends. I managed not to kill them during the summer with all my hive checks. The hives were located at our ranch on a ridge overlooking Uvas

reservoir. If you're familiar with Uvas canyon, by the middle of July it is dry. August and September are very dry. Therefore, sometime in July, I decided not to check on the hives as often because I was afraid of starting a fire. I switched to lifting the back of the hive checking the weight. By the end of August I knew I needed to harvest. How was I to harvest without smoke? I had read in one of the bee magazines that one could take a leaf blower, flip the super on its side and blow all the bees out. They would go about 30 feet. Then you move the super, put the top cover back on and you have removed the bees without lighting a smoker! In theory, using a veil would limit the number of stings.

Labor Day weekend arrived; it was honey harvest time. Well, as usual, the best laid plans of mice and men don't always happen the way they are planned. I had a generator, I had a truck, and I had a leaf blower; QED I was in business. My wife and daughter had not yet learned to be wary of my harebrained ideas. They jumped in the truck to see our first honey harvest up close and personal. In the truck we went to the ranch, driving up the 28 percent grade finally making it to the top of the ridge I parked about 50 feet from the hive, since I didn't want to carry full deeps too far, you see.. I put on my veil, ran the extension cord from the generator to the hive, plugged in the leaf blower. Excitement was in the air as I fired up the generator. I took the top off, turned the super on its side, pulled the trigger on the leaf blower and the generator … died. Now excitement was really in the air, about 20,000 excitements were buzzing and trying to get in my veil. Susan yelled at Christie, "Get in the truck". They managed to escape the excitement spreading outward as the bees in the hive joined their sisters in the defense of the hive. All of a sudden the bees found a hole in my veil. This is not good, I thought as I was running away, swatting and tearing off the veil. Fortunately I had brought a second veil with me. I grabbed it as I ran by the truck bed. I was able to put the supers in the truck and restore the lids on the hives, but there were still lots of bees in the supers. I dropped off Susan and Christie and went to my oldest daughter's house. They were camping, after all it was Labor Day weekend, where there was an exterior outlet. This time the leaf blower worked. It was night time by now so the bees went to the street as they were blown out of the super.

I harvested over a hundred pounds from the two deep supers having received about 32 stings in the process. These girls had been busy, in more ways than one.

What did I learn on this endless road?

The next spring one of the hives was dead. When I opened the hive I found bee butts looking at me from empty combs. They had starved to death, because after the Toyon blooms in Uvas Canyon in June and July, there is nothing to graze on until Christmas when the Manzanita starts to bloom. I had simply removed too much honey and not left them enough. The other hive had apparently had honey stored below. Lesson: know the flowering periods where your bees are located, either leave them enough food, or be prepared to feed. And, replace the prone to rust metal gas tank on your generator with a plastic one.

Drippings From The Extractor

(Notes from the Editor)

On October 12th, Serge Labesque will be teaching a one day class on treatment free beekeeping. This class has been totally organized by Vicki Basham. Attached is Vicki's original email. There are still openings. If you're interested, please contact Vicki. Vicki will be at the meeting on the 8th if you would like to bring a check. Vicki, thanks for all your hard work!

Hello All,

A few weeks ago, I sent out a survey to find out how many people would be interested in a treatment-free beekeeping class taught by Serge Labesque. The response was overwhelmingly positive, so I'm pleased to announce that the class will take place!

In a nutshell:

WHEN: Saturday, **October 12**, from **9:00 am till 4:30 pm**

WHERE: The **Aromas Grange at 400 Rose Avenue**. (Directions below.)

COST: $50. Payment must be made ahead of time.

The fee is nonrefundable, so please be sure you can come! Make check out to Vicki Basham and mail to:

Vicki Basham
6998 Valle Pacifico Road
Prunedale, CA 93907

Please register by October 1, so that I can get an accurate count - thanks ahead of time!

MORE DETAILS:

Serge Labesque may be the only beekeeping instructor in California to teach treatment-free beekeeping. He is especially well known in Sonoma and Marin Counties and teaches beekeeping classes at Santa Rosa Junior College. He's frequently a guest speaker at the San Mateo and Santa Clara bee guild meetings. But he's never been quite this far south to teach, so I'm especially excited that he happily agreed to teach his beekeeping class in our neck of the woods.

Serge Labesque keeps local bees only, and does not use any treatment whatsoever in his colonies for pests or diseases. He keeps about 60 hives and has an amazing survival rate, averaging 85% in the last three years. In his classes, he teaches the management techniques that he attributes to his success.

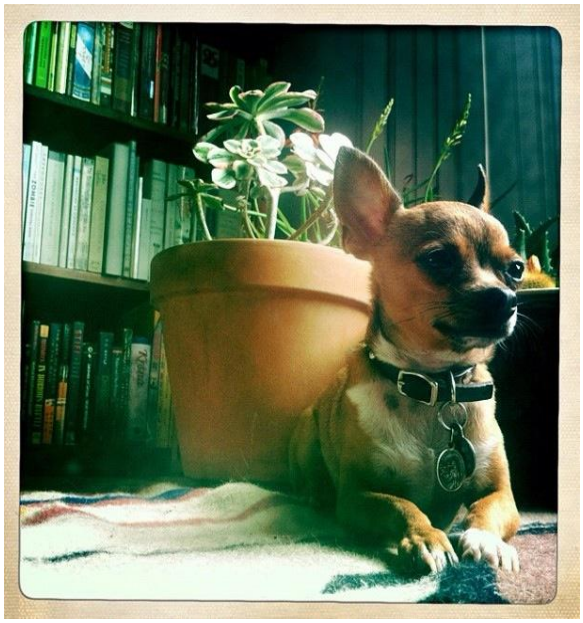
The class will take place indoors from 9:00 till lunch. (PLEASE BRING YOUR OWN LUNCH! Water will be provided.) Directly after lunch, we'll take a 15-minute walk to visit a student's hives. Serge will demonstrate a hive inspection and answer questions . After the inspection, we'll go back to the classroom for the last couple hours. I'll provide each student with a detailed handout of the class.

If you have any questions at all, please don't hesitate to give me a call at 831-601-4758, or email me at VBasham@SerenoGroup.com.

If you'd like to learn a little more about Serge Labesque, you might find this article interesting:
http://www.sfgate.com/homeandgarden/honeybeechronicles/article/Serge-Labesque-builds-a-better-beehive-4599463.php

Summer is barely over, and it's time to start talking about the holidays! This year's GBA Christmas Dinner will be held on December 10th at the Grange Hall, and do we have a deal for you. Any member paying their annual dues at the meeting will get two free dinners. This is a savings of $10.00. Membership dues are $20.00 per year. Please remember that these dues are what allow us to do things like maintain our membership in the California Beekeepers Association and provide guest speakers.

I'd like you to meet Laz. Laz is a three year old chihuahua who lives in San Francisco.



Laz is one of the friendliest, sweetest dogs you'd ever want to meet. The only problem is, Laz has fleas. Laz does not have fleas by choice. His owners are beyond conscientious when it comes to his care. Like so many pet owners, their pocket book pops open when Laz needs care. The problem is, all Laz's fleas, like most of the fleas in San Francisco, are resistant to the common flea medications. Bigger dogs may be able to stand stronger, more potent chemicals, but not Laz. He is forced to suffer unless given almost daily baths. What does this have to do with bees? Well, besides not being much bigger than a bee, Laz's plight is very similar to what we are experiencing with bees and varroa. Over the years we have been presented with new chemicals for varroa mite control. Each one has claimed to be effective against a large percentage of the mites in the hive - just like Frontline or Advantage claimed to be effective against a large percentage of Laz's fleas. Is it possible that we are creating super mites by using these chemicals, just like it

appears we have created super fleas? Think about it. One chemical claims to control ninety percent of a specie. That leaves ten percent unaffected. The next chemical also claims to kill ninety percent, and so on and so forth. So what are we left with - a specie that is resistant to all the chemicals used to date so far. Shall we call it a super bug! I'm not sure what the solution is, but we need to re-evaluate our management practices. Maybe treatment free is an option. No predator wants to kill it's host. That doesn't bode well for its future. Maybe if we just leave it alone the bees and mites will work it out. If that's too optimistic, maybe the answer lies in breeding for hygienic behavior, eliminating gene pools that don't have mite resistance. May be the combination of good hygiene and less toxic treatments is the answer. Again, I'm not sure of the answer. I am sure that we always need to remain open minded to ideas that may be outside the normal way of thinking.

While I'm on my rant about chemicals, let me pass on a recent report about neonicotinoids.

The Xerces Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving invertebrates, has issued a report titled "Beyond the Birds and Bees". Their research shows that the balance of evidence indicates that neonicotinoids are generally harmful to a variety of beneficial insects such as certain wasp and beetles. This is in addition to the already know negative effects on bees. It has been further shown that neonicotinoids are being used prophylactically rather than as part of an integrated pest management program. The problem is not isolated to agricultural areas but is a risk in both suburban and urban areas. If this concerns anyone, when the opportunity presents itself, please let our lawmakers know.

I guess I should end this column with a disclaimer! The views presented are mine, and not necessarily those of the Gilroy Beekeepers Association. Differing opinions are **always** welcome in this newsletter. Please send them to dave.stocks@yahoo.com.

October in the Beeyard

By October**,** the days are definitely getting shorter and the weather cooler, but the beekeeper's work is not getting easier. By now, the brood you see in the hive are the bees that will over winter. It will not be until after the first of the year that brood production will increase. You need make sure that you are doing everything to insure their survival. A common mistake for even seasoned beekeepers is to take too much honey from the hive. By doing so you are not leaving enough winter stores for the bees. If you are using double deep brood boxes, you need a minimum of five frames of honey in the top box along with lots of bees. The bottom box should have at least three frames of pollen and four plus frames of brood. If brood patterns are not uniform, or indications suggest a failing queen, consider combining hives. Remember though that you should always combine only weak hives. By combining a weak hive and a strong hive, you run a risk of transferring the weaker hive's ailment to the stronger colony. Entrances, especially those on weaker hives, should be reduced to prevent robbing and predation by yellow jackets.

If honey and pollen levels are less than the above, or your hive feels light, you will need to start feeding. A 1:1 sugar syrup will give the bees the nutrition they need. A word of caution when feeding syrup. Sugar syrup has a pH of seven. Honey has a pH in the range of 3 to 6. With the arrival of cooler weather, the incidence of many bee diseases such as Nosema increase. It is quite possible that sugar syrup affords the disease a place to grow. Consider adding apple cider vinegar to increase the acidity of the syrup. I have found that two tablespoons of apple cider vinegar per quart of syrup lowers the pH to that similar of honey. Pollen shortages are also critical. If necessary, begin feeding pollen substitutes. Be sure to place them close to the brood. If placed too far away, their benefit is lost.

During October, varroa may still be an issue. If you use chemicals, it may be necessary to make a second treatment. High mite levels at this time of the year do not bode well for the survival of the colony.

Also, remember that until we receive rain, the bees need water. Make sure they have an ample supply.

Calendar of Events

October 2, 2013
Santa Cruz Beekeepers Guild - 6:30 pm
El Rio Mobile Home Park
N. Pacific Ave
Santa Cruz, Ca
http://santacruzbees.com

October 3, 2013
Beekeepers Guild of San Mateo County- 7 pm
1106 Alameda de Pulgas
Belmont, Ca
http://www.sanmateobeeguild.org/
Topic:
"How to market your honey"

October 5, 2013
Monterey Bay Beekeepers - 8 am
2450 N. Fremont St.
Monterey, Ca
http://www.montereybaybeekeepers.org/

October 7, 2013
Santa Clara Valley Beekeepers Guild - 6:15 pm
1292 Minnesota Ave.
San Jose, Ca
http://beeguild.org/
Topics:
"Things to make from your hive"

October 8, 2013
Gilroy Beekeepers Association - 7 pm
8191 Swanston Ln.
Gilroy , Ca
http://www.uvasgold.com/gba/
Topics:
"How to make comb honey"

October 8, 2013
Alameda County Beekeepers Association - 7:30
600 Bellevue Ave.
Oakland, Ca
http://site.alamedabees.org

Classes

Treatment Free Beekeeping
w/ Serge Lebesque
October 12, 2013
Aromas Grange
Contact Vicki at 831-601-4758 for information

Meetings

Western Apiculture Society (WAS)
WAS 2013 Annual Conference
http://ucanr.edu/sites/was2/Conference_Information/
Santa Fe, New Mexico
October 16-19, 2013

California State Beekeepers Association
2013 CSBA Annual Convention
Harrah's, South Lake Tahoe, CA
November 18-22, 2013