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Bees in your backyard

Keeping a hive can become a passion that helps insects thrive

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It's cold outside, with the Northeast in its winter dormancy. So, close your eyes, and imagine the beauty and fecundity of summer. Envision honeybees working, and working, to pollinate and bring forth this bounty. Then, contemplate the quote attributed to Albert Einstein, "If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, then man would only have four years left to live."

Honeybees need to be understood and appreciated by more people. They live in colonies, with all the bees acting as a whole organism, rearing their young and producing honey to continue their survival. In the process, their role in pollinating our food supply, and their impact on agriculture and the U.S. economy, is enormous. According to a study by Cornell University in 2000, honeybees pollinated agricultural crops valued at more than \$14.6 billion per year.

This sounds great, until you learn the honeybee population is being threatened from different angles, and the impact is already being felt. Reports on honeybees worldwide indicate that we have lost 90 percent of both domestic and feral honeybee colonies in the past 17 years. This past year, there was a crisis in California because there were not enough bees to pollinate the almond crops. Farmers had to import honeybees from Australia to meet demands of pollination.

The factors for this decline in population are many, from the loss of natural habitat to the invasion of the parasitic varroa mites, and, more recently, the small hive beetle. Air and water pollution, genetically modified organisms, plus the use of pesticides and herbicides are also linked to declining honeybee health.

Hives popping up

Even though beekeeping has become much more challenging in recent years, requiring a new vigilance against intruders to the hive, honeybee hives have been cropping up in backyards across the country. There are few casual beekeepers, as the activity is driven by passion — for the bees, the products and the environment. Backyard beekeeping offers some hope for the declining bee population, as well as the ecosystem and food supply that depend on it.

The practice of honey collection and beekeeping dates to the Stone Age, as evidenced by cave paintings. Now, this burgeoning interest in backyard beekeeping has the potential to bring new life to our home gardens, and support our local farmers. Beekeeping clubs offer a forum to discuss subjects of interest to beekeepers, as well as their concerns.

There are many different approaches to practicing beekeeping. The majority are conventional and turn to chemical treatments for parasites and viruses. Organic and naturalistic, approaches to beekeeping, from treatment to hive design, encourage the honeybees to rely on their natural instincts, instead of being

manipulated by man. This in turn develops stronger bees.

An example of teamwork

Mankind can learn a lot from honeybees, as the individual bees work together for the good of the whole colony. Honeybees represent a highly organized society, with worker bees evolving through specific roles during their lifetime: They act as nurses, guards, housekeepers, comb builders, royal attendants, undertakers, and finally as foragers. The queen bee lays all the eggs in the hive and can live for several years. Worker bees are all female, and live for only six weeks during the busy summer, and for four months during the winter months. Drone bees are male bees; their purpose is to mate with the queen during her mating flights.

Honeybees don't require a lot of time, but they require love and understanding. They are very gentle creatures, unlike the dastardly yellow jackets. They will not sting unless protecting their hive from an aggressive intruder, or if they are stepped on while buzzing through the clover.

Keeping honeybees is simple and inexpensive after the startup cost. All you need is a hive in a good location, and a willingness to monitor and encourage the bees. A hive and tools can cost between \$110 to \$170. A three-pound package of honeybees, numbering 12,000 with a queen, can cost \$60 to \$90.

There is enormous satisfaction in watching honeybees on a warm spring day, coming and going, collecting pollen to feed their young and nectar to make their honey, improving our world in the process. There is a sense of peace gained from beekeeping, as well as a connectedness with nature that has no comparison. As with the rest of life, there is enormous joy and sometimes heartbreak in beekeeping. And, there is magic when inspecting a hive, and holding a frame filled with gently buzzing bees and glistening honey. Who doesn't love honey?

Chris Harp keeps bees at his home in New Paltz, and tends a total of about 60 hives for farms and organizations in the region. Grai Rice an apprentice beekeeper.
