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NRTA Live & Learn

Learning Their A-Bee-Cs

by Susan Piperato



All Abuzz: Beekeeper Chris Harp holds a beehive frame so kids can examine bees at work. Photograph by John Rizzo for *NRTA Live & Learn*

In his charmingly ramshackle backyard in New Paltz, NY, self-proclaimed “bee doctor” Chris Harp approaches his hive of 30,000 bees with an old-fashioned smoker full of sweet-smelling, smoldering sumac, a tiny wire-mesh box containing a queen bee, and a small digital recorder. He puffs the smoker's bellows to calm the bees before prying open one of the hive's wooden boxes. “Hey, sweetie,” he says as he places the queen bee in the hive with bare fingers.

Harp is introducing the queen to a colony rescued from a sub-basement. As his digital recorder plays the piping sounds the queen bee made as she was being born during a swarm removal, honeybees gather around her, tentacles twitching. At last Harp turns off the recorder and closes the hive. “She is accepted,” he says, smiling.

Honeybees pollinate 80 percent of the crops that need pollinating, yet their numbers have plummeted because of infestation, pollution, climate change, and commercial exploitation. As the honeybee population dwindles, independent, organic beekeepers like Harp are reviving the natural art of beekeeping and demonstrating it to the public. Harp is committed

to protecting honeybees as well as teaching the next generation to respect and protect them as well.

At his [Bee Buzz for Kids workshops](#), Harp demonstrates beekeeping to summer campers and visiting school groups. Each workshop includes honeycomb sampling, donning bee helmets, watching Harp at work, and debunking honeybee myths perpetuated by adults. For instance, it's perfectly safe to be around honeybees, says Harp; “you only get stung if you swat at them, step on them with bare feet, or go into the hive with fear.”

The kids who visit the hive are “full of wonder,” says Harp. “They're excited but still. I hear lots of oohs and ahs. They'll ask, ‘Where are the bees going?’ and ‘How come the bees don't fly in front of you?’ They know there's a honeycomb treat at the end, of course. Even the kids who kept their distance because they were afraid leave with changed attitudes,” says Harp.

Learning about bees matters because it teaches kids “to appreciate where their food comes from,” says Harp, as well as “not to grow up afraid of things they don't have information about.” Most important, they learn “that it's not all ‘me, me, me,’” he says. “They see that it takes group effort to accomplish things. There are many parallels between the social behavior of humans and bees. The biggest difference is that bees don't have egos. Each colony is a single organism; each bee works for the good of all. That's a good lesson for kids to learn.”

About the Author

Susan Piperato writes on sustainable agriculture from New York's Hudson Valley.

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