

"Please accept my resignation. I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member."

– Groucho Marx, *Groucho and Me*

I'm not what you would call a "joiner." Aside from church and work, I don't have many organized social attachments. I wouldn't have joined my county beekeeper's association except for that fact that I was forced into it as a condition for applying for the [Golden LEAF honey bee grant program](#) in 2005 (and I didn't even win a pair of free hives in that lottery, where 3,000 people applied for 250 spots!). However once I realized what the local association was good for, I became an avid participant and contributor. This led to an equally strong appreciation for the state beekeepers' association ([NCSBA](#)).

I have had the opportunity to visit with many county beekeepers' associations in the Piedmont. Each has its own personality. Some are well-oiled machines, while others are laid-back and homey. Some are dominated by a few strong personalities while others welcome and encourage all voices. There are some excellent bee clubs where the only thing wrong with them is the people and others that have great people but the monthly meetings are a complete waste of everyone's time. The best thing about any of them is that we can join a different one if we like. In fact we can concurrently be members of as many associations as we choose, allowing us to attend a great presentation at one club one week and another the next week, as we see fit. Annual dues are typically only five to ten dollars, so the only real limitation is how far you wish to drive. Personally, I am a dues-paying member of two local associations, each which meets about the same distance from my house in opposite directions. I am also on friendly "visiting terms" with two or three other clubs in the area.

What is a county beekeepers' association good for? Rather than make assumptions, I decided to go to the horses' mouths and ask that question directly to the leadership of the



Person County's Jamie Latimer (left) helps kids don beekeeping gear during an outreach event, while Bob Brauer (below) shows a demonstration hive to curious onlookers at the farmers' market.



groups in my region. Specifically, I asked, "Can you please send me descriptions of some of the things your club is doing that provide value to members?"

My inquiry went out to the [Alamance](#), Caswell, Chatham, [Durham](#), Franklin, [Orange](#), [Person](#), Wake and [5-County](#) associations. Not all responded; information from the ones that did is summarized below. As you peruse their replies, consider that it isn't the length of their project lists that is most important. Instead it is the opportunities to participate in activities that are valuable for you. A club that does lots of wonderful things for everybody but you may not be worth any more than one that doesn't do anything at all. But also keep in mind that an active group may be waiting for somebody like you to support an activity that is right up your alley. Maybe the reason they don't do it already is that you haven't joined yet!

Outreach programs to kids

Alamance reports, "One thing we do each year is participate in the *Farm to Table* program sponsored by Alamance County Chamber of Commerce. We talk to about 40 to 50 classes of 4th grade students over two mornings about bees for about 10 or 12 minutes per class. About 10 or 12 other sectors of agriculture take part in this program held at historic Cedarock



Walter and Cathy Starks demonstrate how to make honey frames go round and round really fast at an Orange County Beekeeper's workshop.

Park in southern Alamance County."

Person County does the same sort of thing, participating in 4-H Day hands-on beekeeping demonstrations/presentations and School Science Day presentations.

Orange goes even further by providing woodenware to members who are willing to manage bees at local schools as part of the school's educational curriculum.

Community service & outreach

The local associations in our area do a whole lot in and for their communities. A few examples include:

- Information tables at the Durham, Roxboro, Chapel Hill and Eno River Farmer's Markets; Personality Festival; Eno River Festival; Sandy Creek Monarch Festival; Museum of Life and Science; Person County Library and the NC State Fair. (Person has won the blue ribbon for Best Display at the State Fair for the past three years!)
- Person County is a sponsor for a Nature Journaling class (open to the entire community) with a focus on local pollinators and pollinator forage
- Orange installed and maintains a public pollinator garden at Hillsborough's Dickson House. Likewise, Person installed and maintains Roxboro's Veteran's Memorial Pollinator Garden.
- Orange has hives at schools and Blackwood

Farm Park that it uses for public demonstrations

- Granville County hosts an annual Bee Jubilee, an extravaganza of vendors, educational show-and-tell and presentations. Other area clubs take part in this yearly event as well. It is open to the public and always draws an enthusiastic crowd.
- Such efforts do not go unnoticed. Durham received a grant from [Burt's Bees Greater Good Foundation](#) to support the club's apiary and educational outreach.

Beekeeper education

Many area associations conduct Bee Schools in the spring, either annually or every other year (see [Get Thee to a Bee School](#) for more information). Durham, Orange and Person Counties made special note of their well-attended and highly-regarded schools. The best ones feature highly-experienced instructors, sessions that span six to ten weeks of detailed training, hands-on workshops in equipment construction/assembly and in-the-hive field days.

But education shouldn't stop at Bee School Graduation. Orange offers an intensive Master Beekeeper Program (MBP) Study Group for members who are seeking to advance to the Journeyman and Master level of the MBP (see [Are You Ready for a Challenge?](#)). The sessions are timed to finish just before MBP testing at the NCSBA's Summer Conference. Person County has conducted similar classes in the past; that's where Orange got the idea! The clubs also offer the opportunity for MBP participants to take the Certified Practical Exam and give them plenty of ways to earn the program's mandatory Service Credits.

Orange also forms "clusters" of new bee school graduates, each led by two or more experienced beekeepers, which meet at each other's bee yards once a month during the year. These "First Year Clusters" have a curriculum that they follow through the season, reinforcing best practices as taught in class. Each Cluster has six to twelve members grouped by

geographic location. With that many participants, Cluster members get to see a wide variety of issues that they may only rarely, if ever, see in their own little bee yard.

Durham educates its members by holding an apiary field day every month (the first Sunday, 2pm) at the DCBA apiary at Duke Farm. They also conduct package installation, honey extraction, swarm catching and bait hive workshops every year.

5-County also holds frequent mini-field days so they can provide larger numbers of people with hands-on experience.

Person and Orange hold honey extracting workshops as well. In addition, Person puts on a very popular wax-working workshop just in time for submitting entries to the NC State Fair. Orange holds a Varroa treatment workshop in the summer to familiarize its members with treatment options and techniques for applying them.

Last but not least, Orange provides experienced mentors to a student beekeeping club on the campus of UNC-Chapel Hill and a community hive project in a local retirement village.

Learn by doing

5-County has conducted a very interesting project to provide members with an apiary venue while demonstrating how to dramatically expand a bee yard. Called the Hive Increase Project ([HIP](#)), the ambitious goal is to start with a single nuc colony and, solely by making strategic splits, expand to 12 healthy, sustainable colonies and get a honey harvest from them, all within 18 months. In the meantime, the HIP apiary doubles as a hands-on learning classroom for club members (they've had over 30 working field days!). Moving forward, 5-County intends to transition this project into an ongoing 5CBA club apiary of approximately five hives.

Ongoing support

Orange maintains a very active listserv discussion forum that is open to anyone who wants to sign up and obey the [posting rules](#).



5-County's Hive Increase Project gives members ample opportunities for hands-on learning.

Other associations typically have members-only listservs or web-based forums. In addition to asking beekeeping-related questions, these are a place where people can find out about monthly meeting topics, service opportunities, workshops, potential apiary locations and even such things as the best places to buy cheap sugar.

Mentoring is the cornerstone of successful bee clubs. Most of the associations I've mentioned have some sort of formal or informal mentoring program. Some are as simple as people requesting an experienced person to come have a look-see at their hives.

Durham and Orange have formal Swarm Teams with a central coordinator who keeps a list of beekeepers ready, willing and able to retrieve swarms and perform cut-outs. (See [Free Bees?](#))

The clubs have extractors and related equipment available for rent to members, typically for a nominal fee of \$5 or so per day. Durham also loans a refractometer, observation hive, bee vacuum and books to members.

Durham worked with the Durham County Public Health Department to create a voluntary apiary registry should there have been localized transmission of Zika that necessitated isolated spraying (see [Save the Bees, Starting with Your Own](#)).

As the result of a generous donation from a local scientific research firm, Orange offered heavily discounted, complete hives to its members.

Many Orange members have attended NCSU's "Born and Bred" queen-rearing classes.

At least one graduate has already raised and commercially sold queens this season and the club is now organizing a local queen-rearing co-op.

Orange members get together at a local restaurant for dinner each month before the formal meeting in order to share information and bee-yard stories. (The size of the swarm gets larger and the tree it was in gets taller every time that story gets told!)

Oh, let's not forget the monthly meetings! Recent speakers have included Master Beekeepers explaining how to overcome parasite problems; NCSU and UNC-Greensboro researchers describing their habitat, bee behavior and queen-quality projects; a School of Science and Math instructor sharing his research on honey bee genetics, a state apiary inspector teaching how to diagnose problems in the hive and even an open-to-the-public viewing of a popular honey bee movie. That still leaves room for plenty of "ordinary" topics like preparing for winter, how to make splits and so on.

It's up to you!

I strongly encourage everyone to get involved with their local beekeepers' association. A list of every one of the NCSBA chapters can be found on the [NCSBA website](#).

What if your local club is a dud? Well, years ago I learned a life-changing lesson from the

book [What Color Is Your Parachute?](#) Referring to lousy jobs, the author said that instead of moping around like a loser feeling sorry for ourselves, we have two options: 1) get a better *job*, or 2) make our job *better*. This advice applies here as well. If your local club stinks, you can always join a different one. Or, even better, you can work within the club to transform it into something worthwhile. That leads to another life lesson I've taken to heart: be extremely careful about saying, "Somebody should fix that" or "Somebody should do something" because guess what? I am "somebody" (and so are you)! So if something in a bee club needs fixing, fix it! If the other members won't let you fix it, then take your talents and enthusiasm elsewhere.

As I mentioned at the beginning, we have lots of local associations and they all have different personalities. I'm sure you can find one that suits you. Why not try one this month?

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Orange's Brad Kosiba (left) and Chris Apple (below) celebrate National Honey Day at the Eno River Farmers' Market.

