

*"It is unfortunate when men cannot, or will not, see danger at a distance; or seeing it, are restrained in the means which are necessary to avert, or keep it afar off.... Not less difficult is it to make them believe, that offensive operations, often times, is the surest, if not the only (in some cases) means of defence."*

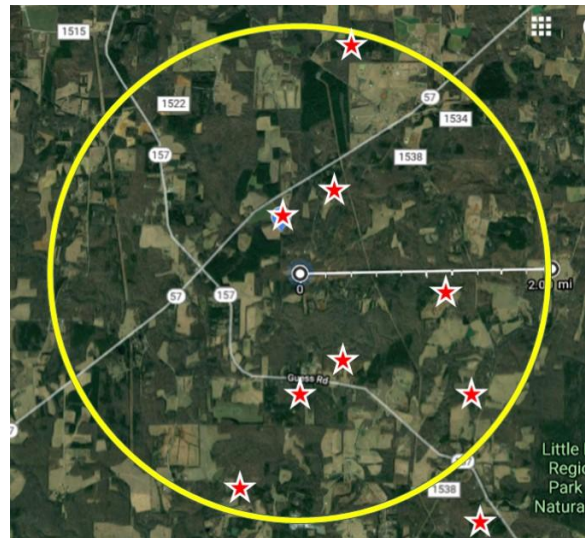
— George Washington to John Trumbull, 1799

I think there is a major omission in pretty much all beekeeping books I have read. There is something that each of us can do to protect our honey bees from pests and diseases that is not mentioned in books and only occasionally alluded to in beekeeping magazines. But I unashamedly emphasize it in the opening class of the 10-week beekeeping school that I oversee each year. I tell my students that I have selfish reasons for wanting them to learn how to properly and successfully care for their bees: bees fly and they carry their problems with them! By doing my small part in making my neighbors better beekeepers, I am contributing to the health of my own colonies.

Mentoring others is often viewed as an altruistic exercise, but in my opinion altruism is a trivial reason to do it compared to the many other major benefits the mentor receives. I don't want to diminish any of the motives for mentoring – many of them are adequate in and of themselves – I am only prioritizing the personal benefits that I receive by nurturing others in their beekeeping adventure.

### One club's experience

The Orange County Beekeepers' Association (OCBA) has a formal mentoring program for first-year graduates of its annual beekeeping school. The First Year Cluster Program groups new beekeepers by geographic location. Each group is led by one or more experienced beekeeper(s). The groups meet periodically at the hives of a member, rotating locations from month to month. Members are encouraged to share issues, successes, suggestions, frustrations, etc. with other members, with the goal of establishing a supportive beekeeping community in each group's area.



This map stars apiaries of beekeepers that I have met who are within easy flying distance of my hives (2-mile radius). No doubt there are many more who I do not know. Are these good beekeepers? Do they raise huge crops of small hive beetles for export? Are their colonies Varroa mite bombs waiting to explode? It is in my best interest to find those answers and do what I can to reduce the potential spill-over of their problems onto my bees.

The mentoring director recently asked current group mentors why they consider mentoring important. The responses were varied, reflecting different people's motivations not only for mentoring but also for beekeeping. This is what we expect in the beekeeping world: we have people from many different perspectives, all working together for a common goal. The collated reasons for mentoring that OCBA's formal mentors gave were:

1. Better educate beekeepers in our community
  - a. Help new beekeepers cut through the "nonsense" and bad ideas
  - b. Mentors better educate ourselves
2. "If you want to learn/master something then TEACH IT!"
3. Mentors learn from others too
  - a. From other mentors
  - b. From new beekeepers
4. Get to see novel approaches to beekeeping challenges
5. We see the problems they face

- a. Maybe get to avoid same problems because we see it in others' apiaries
  - b. More opportunities for first-hand experience with issues
- 6. Build beekeeping community
- 7. Improve beekeeping practices for beekeepers near us
  - a. Reduce pest and disease load (self defense)
  - b. Work toward a "herd immunity" or improved health for the local honey bee population
- 8. Engage more in our community even beyond beekeeping
  - a. Meet more of our neighbors
  - b. Develop new connections to people living close to me that I might not otherwise have had an opportunity to meet
- 9. Pay it forward
  - a. Had a mentor, be a mentor
- 10. Couldn't find a mentor when getting started in beekeeping
  - a. Was frustrated and struggled when I began beekeeping
  - b. Want to help others avoid that
- 11. Because I was asked
- 12. To become a better beekeeper
  - a. More chances to develop comfort in the apiary
  - b. See wider range of colonies, beekeeping practices and approaches to common challenges
  - c. More chances for hands-on experience
- 13. Education and sharing information is the mission of OCBA
  - a. Mentoring is one more format to do that

A common theme is that mentoring allows us to LEARN more about beekeeping than if we only ever look at our own hives. If you have three hives and rarely experience problems, then it doesn't matter how often you inspect those hives: they are only going to have so much to teach you. But if you go around town and look at other peoples' hives, you can greatly multiply your experience-set. For example, how many times have you seen the

slime created by uncontrolled small hive beetle larvae? I hope the answer is "never" in your own hives. But if you visit a few new, struggling beekeepers, you may get to see lots of it!

### Can old dogs learn new tricks?

Don't discount how much you can learn from new beekeepers. Many are eager-beavers who are reading everything they can get their hands on. Much of this book-learning will be tempered as they gain real-world experience, but there are things to be learned nevertheless. Old dogs can learn new tricks, and wise old dogs are willing to learn from newbees. For example, a first-year beekeeper and I were discussing how to apply Apiguard gel trays to treat Varroa mites. We talked about the need for some sort of spacer between the inner cover and the top of the frames so the bees could access the trays. My friend said, "I use my empty Miller feeders as spacers!"

"Um..." I said, not wanting to appear condescending, "There isn't room under a Miller feeder to put the gel trays."

She smiled sweetly, obviously not wanting to appear condescending, and said, "I put them on *upside down*."

Duh! Why didn't I think of that? This old dog just learned a new trick.

### Mentor so you don't have to?

Another reason to mentor that comes under the self-defense umbrella is that if you can nurture more and more well-informed beekeepers with a sharing spirit, that will reduce the load on you as a mentor. Think of it like an Amway pyramid: if you mentor others with the goal of those people becoming mentors to even more people, in a short while there will be plenty of mentors to spread among each year's crop of new of wannabe beekeepers. So you won't be burdened with so many of the same old questions over and over, and the same old requests to drive 20 miles to the other side of the county to look at someone's empty hive bodies. Not only that, but if you actively encourage others to learn more and more about beekeeping, then your discussions with those people at bee meetings

will be a whole lot more interesting. You will be able to learn from them!

### Local-based formal training

Along those lines, OCBA conducts a Master Beekeeper Program (MBP) Study Group every spring. Around 20 people meet once a month from February to June in order to prepare for the MBP testing at the NCSBA Summer Conference. Topics come from the [NCSBA MBP Study Guide](#) and each participant must research and teach at least one of them. Participants are also encouraged to develop full-blown presentations based on what they have learned and present them at an OCBA monthly meeting. An overwhelming percentage of participants go on to serve as mentors in the First-Year Cluster Program. More than a half dozen have earned Journeyman and/or Masters level certification in the NCSBA MBP program in the three years this has been offered.

### Proof of concept

Does this approach to mentoring work? Two friends, Chris Apple and Cynthia Speed, completed OCBA's bee school together a few years ago. They came to me afterwards and said, "Can you please mentor us by showing us your hives and answering our questions?" I was impressed with their tenacity and also concerned because one of them is within a two-mile flight range of my apiary. So I agreed to what they asked. As time went on, they have both stepped up as key volunteers in the association, attended the MBP Study Group each year, and perhaps most importantly, "paid it forward" by generously giving their time and advice to other beekeepers. At July's NCSBA Summer Conference, both were awarded their hard-earned Master Beekeeper certifications. This is my payment as a mentor, and I love it!

### What do you have to offer?

Someone does not have to be a Master Beekeeper to mentor. If you have read a bit, attend your local association meetings and have managed to carry colonies through the winter, you are very well qualified to help a new beekeeper. Think back to when you started

beekeeping: if you were like me, you knew absolutely nothing of importance about honey bee husbandry. So even sharing baby steps with a beginner moves them ahead tremendously.

One word of caution: beekeepers are often enthusiastic experimenters. That's fun for you with your own colonies but new beekeepers have no idea what is conventional versus experimental. Please clearly separate the two concepts when you are teaching others: don't encourage them to stray from tried-and-true, [Apiary Inspector-recommended](#) methodologies when they are trying to learn the basics. There will be plenty of time for their own experimentation when they have a better idea of what they are doing.

What if you are full of enthusiasm but not full of experience? OCBA encourages its members to become "bee buddies" – people who share with one another, visit each other's apiaries and so forth even though one or both of them may have little knowledge and even less experience. That's what Chris and Cynthia did when they started. To help ensure success, bee buddies should have a relationship with an experienced mentor, but they don't expend all of their energy on that mentor. The mentor can be consulted with questions and issues but the bee buddy is the one to call to share your excitement when the honey flow begins, you are able to spot the queen for the first time, you want an opinion on whether to paint your hives pink or fuchsia, etc.

There are many ways to learn and many ways to share. Find one that works for you. If your [local beekeepers' association](#) doesn't have a formal mentoring program, start one! If they aren't interested in doing so, join a second club! The beekeeper you will help most is you!

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