

“You can only become truly accomplished at something you love. Don’t make money your goal. Instead, pursue the things you love doing, and then do them so well that people can’t take their eyes off you.”

— Maya Angelou

Bee schools have mostly wrapped up for the 2020 season. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, some, such as my own Orange County’s school, finished using on-line distance-learning technologies. I foresee that the predicament we are in will provide motivation for the wider uptake of these technologies across all of our pursuits, and beekeepers should try to keep up.

An old complaint is that the group experience isn’t as warm and huggy over the internet, but new tools have made that concern diminish greatly. In fact, if we can replicate our in-person collaborative sharing experience and add in all the new technological wizardry for on-line conferencing, it is possible that the drive-to-the-Ag-Center model for meetings could become obsolete. Think about it... when was the last time you physically went to the DMV to renew your automobile tag? That may not be exactly the same thing but the challenges, and the tremendous improvement in process that technology has delivered, is not too far different. How about a better example: how often do you drive to the movie theater versus watching something on Netflix?

Oops, I’ve gone off on a tangent. What was I talking about? Oh yes, I love bee school, whether as a student, instructor or director. It gives us a chance to recharge our enthusiasm for a certain lovable, fuzzy bug.

Most bee schools have similar curricula, and all should include the topic “Products of the Hive”. The classic products are, of course, honey, beeswax, pollen and propolis. Throw in royal jelly to round it out. We also mention the most important “hive product” of all: pollination services. But what about the production and sale of bees themselves? Aren’t they often overlooked as a money-making endeavor? Chances are, bee-sales opportunities frequently arise in our bee yards but we simply



Yikes! Swarm cells! Do we leave them, destroy them or sell them for \$10 or more each?

don’t take advantage of them. Here are a few suggestions that any beekeeper can pursue.

Queen cells

One easy money-making opportunity that is very rarely capitalized on in my area is the sale of queen cells. Swarm season is in full force right now (See April 2019’s [“Swarm season is here. Are you ready?”](#)); why not make lemonade out of lemons?

When a colony has blessed us with multitudes of capped queen cells, the typical response is to cut them out and discard them. Then we go back to the house, check our e-mail and read countless pleas by fellow members of our bee club who are trying to buy queens. Instead of throwing those queen cells away, why not tell your bee club buddies that you’ll sell them all the queen cells they want for, say, \$10 apiece, two for \$15, or best offer... whatever the local market will bear. Buyers can even come over and pick out which ones they want. All you have to do is use a pocketknife to cut a generous circle around a capped queen cell, then gently hand it to your customer.

Paul Kelly at Canada’s University of Guelph has a nice [video](#) that shows how to safely and easily transport queen cells. Always keep them in their natural upright position (turning them upside down will damage the developing pupa

inside) and keep them warm. Install them as soon as possible in a new colony.

From the buyers' standpoint, queen cells are more readily accepted by a colony than a strange new queen is, they cost less and they are locally raised. From our standpoint, we've got them anyway and they can put money in our pocket. What's not to like?

Nucleus Colonies

A more common way to make money from our bees' swarming impulse is to make nucleus colonies to hopefully forestall their departure. A frame with a swarm cell or two can be put into a new box with frames of brood, honey and pollen. In a couple of weeks, you've got a new, fully-functioning colony. See May 2016's "[Making Splits without Bananas](#)" for more information.

This requires more resources and more time than simply selling queen cells, but is more financially rewarding per unit. Quality nucleus colony are selling for \$175 to \$200 this spring.

Note that I said "quality." Please don't use the sale of nucs as a way to get rid of your vicious queens or skanky old comb! There has been a nuc seller on Craig's List who boasts that he doesn't treat for Varroa mites; he is using frequent splitting as a pseudo-treatment and is selling other people his mites, passing his problem onto them. Buyer beware, but seller, please don't be "that guy." (See December 2016's "[Packages versus Nucs: Want to Fight About It?](#)" for a comparison of different colony-starting options.)

Swarms

I know beekeepers who, it seems, can take a swarm trap out into the yard and by the time they reach a tree to hang it on, a swarm moves in. These folks complain about not having enough equipment to hive all of those swarms, what are they going to do with all of them, the sound of all that buzzing keeps them up at night, etc. Why don't they just dump them into a box and sell them as-is? I've caught some massive swarms, many several times larger than a commercial three-pound package. We could



This swarm is a lot bigger than a typical commercial bee package. What would you pay for a "package" this large? Photo: Rick Brown

give the buyer a discount off of the price of a package to account for the fact that a swarm-queen may be superseded rather quickly (although package-queens are often superseded too). Regardless of the particular price we come up with, a swarm is a valuable commodity. But I don't see them offered for sale around here.

We can add value to swarms by installing them into a hive. Once the colony has brood of all ages, we can sell it as a nuc.

Sting Therapy

\$200 for 20 or 30 thousand worker bees in a nuc sounds like a lot of money, but how would you like to sell worker bees, without a queen, for a dollar each? That's crazy... who

would pay that much for worker bees? Well, there are lots of people in our area who apply honey bee stings to treat themselves for a variety of ailments. Typically, they buy the bees through the mail, getting enough each time to last for several weeks of stings. One supplier offers ten bees for \$12.95, which includes shipping. That's over a dollar per bee! The per-bee price drops as the quantity increases, the cheapest being \$27.50 for 120 bees (23 cents each).

October 2017's "[Can Stings be a Good Thing?](#)" explains what some people go through to get stung. As beekeepers, we should never offer anyone medical advice concerning the products we sell – it is illegal and unethical for us to do so – and we should never apply bee venom therapy to a customer (that would be practicing medicine without a license). But if someone wants to buy a few bees, for whatever reason, and we have some to sell, that can be a win-win. Or if you are a really nice person and they are too, give them a few bees out of kindness. We probably smash that many every time we put the cover back on our hives.

The "[Stings](#)" article mentioned above suggests some ways to tap into the "bees for self-stinging" market. There are patient groups that you can reach out to, and letting members of your local beekeepers' association know that you are willing to sell bees for this purpose may generate referrals.

Casual or big time?

Every beekeeper in North Carolina should be familiar with the general provisions of the [North Carolina Honey Bee Act](#). The important bits (for us) are described in June 2018's "[Who Ya Gonna Call?](#)" With respect to the sale of honey bees, the law states:

Prior to selling bees in North Carolina, a person shall obtain a permit from the

Commissioner.... No permit shall be required for (i) the sale of less than 10 bee hives in a calendar year, (ii) a one-time going-out-of-business sale of less than 50 bee hives, or (iii) the renting of bees for pollination purposes or the movement of bees to gather honey. (1991, c. 349, s. 1.)

So, if you are only going to sell a few colonies here and there, you do not need a permit. But if the suggestions I've described turn into a nice little sideline (sale of 10 or more colonies per year), contact your [NC Apiary Inspector](#) to get a permit. On the flip side, if you are buying bees from anyone, first verify that they are selling bees legally by checking the [list of those who have permits](#). Would you buy a "Rolex watch" from somebody selling them from the trunk of a car? If not, why would you trust somebody selling bees without a permit?

One person's trash...

I hope this will inspire you to expand your perspective on Products of the Hive. Not only can we make money from what are essentially by-products, or even waste-products, of our hives, but we can advance the production and use of locally-raised honey bees. This can help make North Carolina's beekeepers more resilient as we become less dependent on suppliers in Georgia and elsewhere. That's a win for all of us!

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