

"If you don't do it my way, I suggest you commit suicide."

— Josef Albers

I am the headmaster for a 10-week beekeeping school that my county beekeepers' association conducts every year. I thoroughly enjoy that role and I always learn a lot as I teach others. A major challenge, though, is that my students often want me to "just tell them what to do." This sentiment invariably arises following the Equipment Class, when just about anyone who is paying attention comes away dizzy, if not nauseous, with all of the potential options and configurations for bee boxes, frames, stands and other paraphernalia. Add to this the choices surrounding whether to buy Italians, Carniolans, Russians or some variant. And do we start with packages, nucleus colonies, established colonies, caught swarms or maybe something else? But don't worry, you have a few days to decide! But then we have to choose to feed with candy boards, liquid syrup, top feeders, in-hive feeders, front feeders or community open feeders... and whether to control Varroa mites with Formic Pro, Apiguard, ApiVar, HopGuard II or oxalic acid.... Please! Just tell me what to do!

The irony is that if I were to print out a specific list of exactly what to buy and exactly what to do, I know someone would say, "But what about top bar hives? What do you think of them?" Or, "My friend has Saskatraz bees... should I get those?"

Having attained degrees in both Marketing and Applied Economics, I know that human beings want options. But we don't want *too many* options. It begs the question, why do we have so many options in beekeeping anyway? I believe that there are at least five different reasons.

All beekeeping is local

The most defensible reason for lots of options is the old saying, "all beekeeping is local," and in fact the meaning of "local" extends to your specific backyard. Our



Do you install queen cages with the candy end, the end where the cork has been removed, facing up, facing down or facing sideways? I don't do it that way. I don't remove the cork at all until I do it manually after a few days. Are you doomed to failure, or am I?

Piedmont NC seasons and nectar flows are vastly different from those in Ohio, New York, Alaska or Florida. A hobbyist has different considerations and preferences than a commercial beekeeper. An old geezer like myself may be concerned more about the weight of boxes and less about the cost of materials than a young beekeeper. All of these factors translate into certain configurations being more or less desirable or practical in one situation versus another. Are your circumstances exactly the same as mine? Assuming that they are, and your optimal equipment choices are aligned with mine... what's your favorite color? I'm sure that at some point our preferences aren't exact copies.

Another angle on "all beekeeping is local" is that when someone claims success with a technique or strategy, such as Varroa mite control, we must carefully examine all of the circumstances associated with that success to determine whether those conditions are the same as ours. For example, I know beekeepers who sell nucleus colonies and brag that they never apply Varroa mite treatments. But they are making frequent and numerous splits, foregoing honey harvests and preventing individual colonies from building up to full strength, and this is contributing to whatever

mite mitigation success they may experience. Are we going to do exactly the same thing in our bee yard? Are our bee yards as isolated as theirs are? Are we content with the large losses that they likely experience, because we will recover from them by making splits? If we don't have the same conditions and expectations, why would we expect the same results?

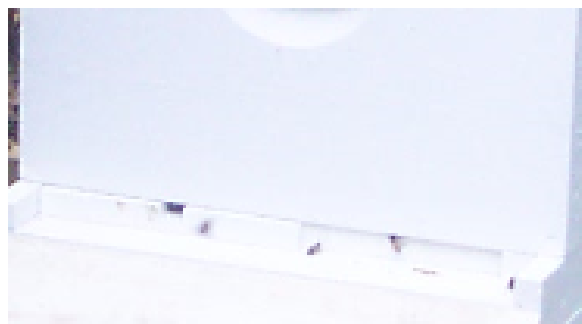
It all works

Here's a secret that you should only share with other members of our beekeeping fraternity: within wide bounds, pretty much any of the choices we have will work. Never forget that almost every gadget we own, every box we use, every option we employ exists in order to make things easier for the beekeeper, not the bees. The bees don't care. They don't care if they are in a Langstroth, top bar or Warré hive, cardboard box, abandoned refrigerator or eaves in an attic. Don't delude yourself into thinking that they do. You may care what you work with but our fuzzy little friends have no concept whatsoever of what all the fuss is about.

Just because we have something that works just fine doesn't mean that somebody won't sell us a substitute for it, even if it isn't any better than the tired old option that it is replacing. Consider the Bingham smoker, invented by Moses Quinby in 1873 and improved by Tracy Bingham in 1903. What's not to like? Yet the bee supply houses sell things like "liquid smoke" as a clever substitute to yucky old regular smoke. Does it work? I don't care.

When it doesn't work, it isn't obvious

The corollary to "it all works" is that many things don't really work. This includes things that are applied that would have "worked" even if we didn't use them. For example, there are loads of specialty equipment and management options that people in our area use to overwinter their bees. Other people don't use them and their bees overwinter just fine. But if you believe that Product X will cause overwintering success, and you use it, and your bees survive, bingo! Product X works!



Do you place your entrance reducers with the opening facing up or facing down? I don't do it that way. I prefer to use robbing screens. Am I a heretic?

In academic and clinical research, we use "controls" to attempt to avoid these fallacious conclusions. We would use Product X on one group of hives, not use it on another group that was otherwise identical, and compare the results. If the outcome was similar for both, the conclusion is that Product X doesn't add any value. But few beekeepers have the resources or motivation to do careful, controlled comparisons of products. Instead, we settle for anecdotal evidence, either from our own experience or from someone else's.

Clever trumps functional

A clever idea is difficult to kill, regardless of evidence that it doesn't work. Part of the problem is that new entrants to the beekeeping world reinvent failed technologies or philosophies when they don't see their idea in common use. Those attempts will fail just as the earlier ones did but it is human nature to insist on recreating the cycle of innovation, implementation and abysmal failure oneself rather than taking someone else's word for it.

A classic example is using whole-hive powdered sugar dusting in an attempt to control Varroa mites. It was a terrific idea 20 years ago and wouldn't the world be a better place if it worked? But it doesn't work. When we try it, it may appear to work, but our colonies will eventually, inevitably, predictably be overrun by mites and die. Sorry. But every year, when I explain how to do the sugar-shake mite assessment test, a clever student will ask,

“Has anybody thought about doing that for controlling mites in the whole hive?”

There are many such technologies and philosophies that are great ideas and they really should work. But they don't, or if they do, it is at such a high cost in resources, both in terms of time, money and bees, that only an idiot would employ them. The Big Pharma company I once worked for was most successful when they adopted a policy of being a strong second-follower with regard to new scientific breakthroughs rather than being on what we called the “bleeding edge” of research. Let somebody else invest all the time and money on failures (which vastly outnumber successes); we can sweep in with efficiencies and expertise once we know the things that are genuinely worth pursuing.

Contrarians rule

Years ago, an acquaintance from Communist Poland told me a joke about the Soviet Union: “Will there ever be an alternative political party in the Soviet Union? No, because if there ever was, everybody would join that one and there would still only be one party.”

Being somewhat of a contrarian myself, I can identify with the deep-seated need to be different. In beekeeping, we see this in equipment options. Why do people use Layens or Warré hives, for example? There is no good reason to do so. The same goals can be accomplished with a Langstroth hive, or even more so with a Long Langstroth hive, and as explained earlier, the bees have no opinion on the matter. But using conventional equipment would be conformist. We must be a toady at our employment to get paid and a compromiser with our spouse to not be murdered in our sleep, but dog gone it, we can be free spirits in our own bee yard!

What was I talking about?

I may have drifted a bit, but my point is that I'm not going to tell anyone exactly what they must do to keep bees, or even to keep bees successfully. I've learned from watching our highly-experienced State Apiary Inspectors that when someone asks, “Can I do such-and-such?” where “such-and-such” is the biggest pile of baloney outside of the Oscar Mayer factory, in the long run the overall best answer is often, “Well, you could do that.” There is no need to add, “... if you are a numbskull without the sense the Good Lord gave a turnip” because people are going to do what people are going to do. And who knows? Maybe it will work for them, because all beekeeping is local, and it all works. If it doesn't work, maybe they'll learn from the experience... if they've got the sense the Good Lord gave a turnip.

So, if you want to put your inner cover on the hive such that the notch faces the back, go ahead and do it. I place mine so the notch faces forward. I am dogmatic about that, based on excellent, irrefutable logic. Is that the best way to do it? It works for me, and that's what is important. If you have irrefutable logic for doing it differently, I'm happy for you.

But what seems to work for me may not work for you at all. Even more important, what gives me joy in the bee yard may not satisfy you in the least. And that's what's really important – if we aren't having fun, why on earth would we do this?

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