

“Everyone wants something, and everyone is willing to do whatever they have to in order to get it. Regardless of who winds up hurt in the process.”

— Kyra Dune

July and August are the time of year that we see posts on Facebook and NextDoor lamenting the fact that honey bees are overrunning someone’s hummingbird feeders. Why is that? What advice can we give to these people? As beekeepers, do we have some sort of responsibility to help Normal People address nuisance bees? At the very least, providing aid may prevent an anti-bee sentiment from gaining ground. And we certainly don’t want Joe Birdlover to kill the bees that stray into his or her yard.

I’ll admit that I have almost written about this topic a number of times. But the problem is that there isn’t good information on dealing with this conflict. The most authoritative honey-bee-specific resources are silent on the subject and Cooperative Extension sites that I’ve found simply repeat general advice that I’ve seen elsewhere. They’ll often end with a suggestion to plant summer-flowering bee forage plants, which sounds good but you and I know that won’t go far to address the problem.

With the clear understanding that I’m not an ornithologist or an expert on interspecies harmony, perhaps what little bit I do know can at least advance the conversation slightly.

The basic dilemma is this: honey bees collect nectar, which is simply natural sugar syrup (mostly sucrose and water), and depend on it for their very lives. So do hummingbirds. In the wild, any competition between the two goes unnoticed and probably isn’t widespread. But when humans supply a centralized, abundant source of sugar syrup (sucrose and water), clearly every syrup-eater in the neighborhood will want its share. We can join in when people curse ants and yellow jackets at the feeder; we curse them too when they infest our honey bee feeders. Knowing how hard it is to keep unwanted insects out of our honey bee



It is fun to feed hummingbirds at backyard feeders. But they eat the same thing that honey bees do. Is there a way to keep honey bees from overrunning hummingbird feeders?

feeders, is there a way to only feed hummingbirds at hummingbird feeders and do so in a way that doesn’t harm honey bees? That’s the challenge.

Around here, we don’t have much of a problem with this conflict in the spring and fall. The reason is simple. Honey bees’ taste discernment with respect to nectar isn’t nuanced for flavor: rich-tasting buckwheat nectar and bland sugar syrup are equally appealing, all else equal. But bees are picky about sugar concentration. They strongly prefer sweeter versus less sweet.

The nectar of bee-forage plants is typically 25 to 50% sugar. It is worth noting that for many plants, tulip poplar included, brand new, fresh nectar may have a lower concentration but the concentration rises when the nectar dehydrates as the day goes on. The standard recipe for hummingbird syrup, on the other hand, is one part sugar and four parts water, i.e., 20% sugar. If a honey bee finds a nectar

source with a higher sugar ratio than that, the higher-sugar nectar will be preferred over Jane Homeowner's hummingbird syrup. In spring, many flower sources are more appealing than 20% syrup. But during the summer dearth, not only is hummingbird syrup likely richer than other sources, it may be the only source in town.

That leads to Tip #1: Don't go overboard on sugar for hummingbird syrup. Stick to the standard recipe (20% sucrose). A higher percentage of sugar will tend to draw other foragers such as honey bees.

A second consideration is the type of hummingbird feeder that is used. Walk down the Garden Center aisle at Wal-Mart or Home Depot and you'll see a dizzying array of feeder options, some good and some terrible. The key is to get one where the access slots are set high above the syrup reservoir. Hummingbirds have very long tongues while honey bees, in comparison, have tiny ones. If a honey bee cannot reach the syrup, she will quickly lose interest in the feeder.

In my personal experience, it seems that the feeders that have flat feeding surfaces are better at this than those where the access slots are at an angle. So-called "pancake" feeders (flat and round) are particularly good with respect to this feature. Those have better separation of the feeding slot and the syrup to begin with, and since the syrup isn't gravity-fed the distance becomes greater as the syrup is consumed, making it less and less accessible by bees.

Also, again from my personal experience, it seems that the feeders with "bee guards" – little cages over the access slots – are the worst with respect to placing slots in such a way that the syrup is accessible to bees. I assume they've added the "bee guards" in an attempt to correct the fundamental problem with their slots, but at least for the ones I've had, that after-the-fact patch doesn't work.

A factor that can undermine well-placed access slots is a large number of sugar ants. On typical feeders, these tiny ants can clog up the slots, thereby becoming an easily accessible



The so-called pancake feeder in the foreground is specifically designed so that the space between the access slots and the syrup is greater than the length of a bee's tongue. It also has an ant moat that keeps ants from traversing from the wire hanger to the syrup container.

sweet blob of sugary goodness for visiting bees. That is the main issue with the feeder pictured on page one. Putting something like Vaseline or Tanglefoot on the wire that the feeder hangs from can help prevent ants from accessing the feeder, and frequent cleaning of the feeder keeps the ones that do get through from creating a gummy mess. Even better, many of the pancake feeders have a built-in ant moat that separates the syrup access points from the wire that the feeder hangs from.

A bit of advice offered by Cooperative Extension sites is to avoid feeders that have cute yellow flowers on the access slots. They are completely unnecessary for attracting hummingbirds but they may attract honey bees. I have noticed that the better-constructed feeders, the ones with well-placed slots, do not have cute yellow flowers (the slots are painted red, just like the rest of the feeder).

That completes Tip #2: get a feeder that isn't fundamentally designed to create problems. Shop around for inexpensive versions and consider giving them to neighbors who complain about bees at their hummingbird feeders. Spending the price of a pound or two of honey may be a cheap path to domestic harmony.

Perhaps an often-overlooked factor is the placement of the feeder. Someone recently asked me for advice about honey bees that were "swarming" (his term) his deck as they fed from his hummingbird feeder. It reminded me of an issue I once had with a whiskey-barrel water feature on my own deck. My bees loved it and were coming and going with gusto all during the warm months. It didn't bother me but my dear wife and children wouldn't go out on the deck during daylight. The solution was simple: the bees were arriving from the left side of the deck, so I moved the water feature from the right-hand side to the left. Now they could fly to and from the water without crossing a human pathway. They were just as abundant but no longer a menace. I suggested that the hummingbird-feeder owner do likewise: watch the bees to determine their flight path and move the feeder such that it would minimize human interaction. That doesn't eliminate the whole issue but it downgrades it from a hazard to an annoyance.

Thus we have Tip #3: move the feeder so the bees' flight path doesn't cross areas with humans in it.

One last thing to consider is that everybody's got to eat. If we follow all of the



Pancake feeders such as this one may help with hummingbird/honey bee conflicts as well as problems with yellow jackets and ants. The proof is in the happy expressions on these birds' faces!

suggestions I've mentioned and still have birds and bees fighting at the syrup feeder, an approach that is best for our blood pressure may be to say, "Isn't that interesting! Let's place bets on who will win!" Neither the birds nor the bees will become extinct from their tussling at the feeder. But convincing our neighbors of that could be the greatest challenge yet!

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