

"I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past."

— Thomas Jefferson

It has been extremely cold at my house this week with the forecast calling for even lower temperatures in the week ahead. I'm taking advantage of that by focusing on indoor tasks. My outside bee yard activities are limited to noninvasive inspections in winter (see [Winter Inspections](#) and [Should We Tear Hives Apart in January?](#) for some thoughts on that). My inside activities are supposed to incorporate a whole lot of preparation for spring, such as putting new foundation in wax-moth-larvae-eaten frames and patching/repairing/painting boxes and bottom boards. I may get around to that... one day.

But if I don't get those feeders resealed before I need them, at least I can check off America's traditional January pastime: making New Year's resolutions. Maybe my procrastination-inspired plans will encourage you to actually get some of this stuff accomplished too.

Looking forward to 2023, here is my list of a half-dozen want-to-dos, ought-to-dos and maybe-will-dos:

1. READ MORE

I love to read bee books. (See [Good Books for Winter Reading](#) for some suggestions). But I am inherently lazy. Or maybe it isn't that I'm too lazy to read; maybe I am just too busy with other things to make the time to read. Regardless, I need to catch up on some key texts. One is the practically brand-new [The Beekeeper's Handbook \(5th edition, 2021\)](#) by Dianna Sammataro and Alphonse Avitabile. After many years of faithful service, Keith Delaplane's [First Lessons in Beekeeping](#) has gotten so woefully out of date that it could do more harm than good if people were to actually apply its obsolete pest management recommendations. So it is time for my county NCSBA Chapter's bee school to upgrade. And that means I've got to truly read the new book,



not just thumb through the pictures. No worries, I've got a couple of weeks to do so.

2. DO A BETTER JOB OF SWARM PREVENTION

I joke that I'm on a quest to repopulate the feral honey bee population in North Carolina, but that's not really funny. [Why Swarms Are Bad](#) describes why beekeepers should make swarm elimination, or at least reduction, a priority. Swarms become mite bombs and die, they infest the walls of our neighbors' houses, and perhaps most importantly they take the HONEY out of HONEY bee keeping.

My problem is that I don't really know how to prevent my colonies from swarming. I am very familiar with countless techniques that others use when they claim to have swarming under control in their bee yards, but those techniques don't work for me. ([See Swarm Season Is Here! Are You Ready?](#)) Similarly, the textbook triggers for swarming (mature queens, crowded brood nests and so on) don't apply to my bees. They swarm when they feel like it without any regard to those classic causes. It is my bees that prove the truth of the saying, "bees are gonna do what bees are gonna do."

But that can't be the final answer. I'll work on it this spring.

3. GET LOTS OF HONEY

In the 18 or so years that I've kept honey bees, I've had some very nice harvests. But the biggest ones were in the early years. There has been a whole lot of clear-cutting in my neck of the woods, removing who knows how many tulip poplars and other great honey trees. Plus a flood of hobby beekeeper competition has moved in around me. Also, just between us, I'm less focused than I used to be. But this year I'm going to get back on track. The most important way to do that is #3, do a better job of swarm prevention. Bees that aren't in the box don't make any honey.

I will also experiment with making my colonies stronger rather than focusing on more colonies. A strong colony makes more honey than two weak ones. Things to play around with include two-queen colonies, using the method the late Roger Hoopingarner taught me.

4. KEEP DOING THE THINGS THAT APPEAR TO BE WORKING

There are things that don't warrant changing. Instead, they should be more deeply imbedded into my routine. My current Varroa management plan is a good example. I have been striving to monitor my colonies more effectively and more often (see [Effective Varroa Management Must Begin with Monitoring](#)). I have a long way to go but I'm pointed in the right direction.

This is the second year that I've done an oxalic acid vaporization as a clean-up treatment in December. It is well known that oxalic acid doesn't work well when there is capped brood; even the You-Tube advice to zap them repeatedly over a half dozen weeks, contrary to the legal label instructions, has been shown to do nothing more than maintain infestation levels, not reduce them. The regimen that I've adopted is to use Apiguard or Formic Pro, depending on the time of year, as my primary mite eradication method. Then when the colony is broodless, or nearly so, in mid-December I

clean up what remains of the mites. The goal is to keep the mite levels low all year long (that's why monitoring is important) and then clean the slate in December so that the spring bee population can build up without Varroa... as long as that lasts.

5. EXPERIMENT MORE

Anybody who learned everything they needed to know about beekeeping their very first year, and applies that limited knowledge over and over because "that's the way to do it", would benefit from getting out and seeing how other people do things. Complacency is comfortable, so I sometimes have to force myself to experiment with new techniques, tools and approaches.

An example is a simple but time-saving tip (#9 in [What's an Inspection?](#)) passed on to me by Don Hopkins: Start an inspection by going through the bottom box first. Not only are the interesting bits most often in the bottom box, separating the boxes from the outset prevents the queen from playing hide-and-seek with you by passing from the top to the bottom and then back up again.

For 2023, I intend to follow the lead of some of my experienced friends and experiment with canvas inner covers. I've already bought the canvas and now just need to cut it to size and install it. [All Hail the Inner Cover](#) explains that what most of us call an inner cover isn't really intended as an inner cover... I'm curious as to how the original model works in practice. Maybe I won't like them. I won't know until I try.

6. DO MORE MENTORING

One of the things that I really loved about progressing from a beginner to an intermediate beekeeper was the opportunity to share with others who were also interested in our fuzzy little livestock. I used to do a lot of mentoring, impromptu apiary tours, taking questions and researching the answers, etc. COVID halted a lot of that. This year I plan to break free from my standstill and get back into sharing and caring.

Don't tell anybody, but I have discovered a great way to do this. I have a young friend whom I've known since he was in high school; he is now an upperclassman at NCSU. He wants to increase his knowledge of beekeeping and advance in the [NCSBA Master Beekeeper Program](#). The best way to do that is with hands-on experience. I have generously offered that he can come out to my bee yard and perform inspections, conduct mite assessments, apply treatments, put on honey supers, remove bees from supers for harvest, extract honey and maybe even cut the grass and put a new roof on the barn. We'll see how long he holds up, but prospects look good.

While it is true that the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry, it is also true that to fail to plan is to plan to fail. I may not achieve all of these goals in 2023 but maybe I can stay pointed in the right direction. What about you? In January 2024, what will you say you did in 2023?

Randall Austin is a NC Master Beekeeper who keeps a few honey bee hives in northern Orange County, NC. He can be reached at s.randall.austin@gmail.com.

*Note: All previous articles are archived at https://baileybeesupply.com/educational_resources/
Copyright 2023, no reproduction in whole or in part without permission of the author, except for noncommercial, educational purposes.*