

*“Build a man a fire, and he'll be warm for a day.
Set a man on fire, and he'll be warm for the rest
of his life.”*

— Terry Pratchett

Many years ago, BBK (before beekeeping), a good friend invited me to come to his place and see his honey bees. I politely declined, fearing being stung by vicious creatures with one goal on their tiny minds: my destruction. Little did I know that bee stings, while certainly not something that I seek out, aren't on the top ten list of adverse things that can happen in the bee yard. I've gotten to where I forget most stings shortly after they happen, but other situations become the stuff of legend.

Setting the house on fire

Don't tell my wife, but once I almost set our house on fire. I guess technically I did, but let's not get technical. I had inspected my bees and returned to my back porch. What should I do with the smoldering leftover fuel in my smoker? As usual, I dumped it out on a bare spot on the ground. No problem. There were still a few embers but no flames.

I continued putting away the rest of my tools when I happened to glance in the direction of the ash pile. A five-foot-radius patch of lawn was on fire and flames were lapping at the wooden siding of my house. Yikes!

I quickly weighed my options. Jumping into my car, leaving town and changing my name to Buster McGillicuddy was the top choice, but I knew my wife would hunt me down and kill me. So I grabbed a nearby bucket, filled it with water and began dousing the flames. Fortunately, things hadn't yet gotten completely out of hand and I was able to prevent mariticide.¹

In case you are wondering, now I dump my leftover ashes into an all-metal paint can, seal the can with the lid and put the whole thing,



After narrowly avoiding a near-divorce experience, my smoker and spent-fuel can now get safely stored away in a box designed to hold grenades.

along with my smoker, in a large military-surplus cannister designed to hold M430 HEDP (high-explosive, dual-purpose) grenades.

There's more!

I shared the idea for this article with some friends and was soon showered with similar tales, each educational and entertaining in its own right. Who knew that beekeepers are such pyromaniacs?

Joan Kalnitsky's story

“I can admit to almost burning down our apiary. I rarely inspect alone but needed to inspect and had company so off I went. I have no idea how it started. I had put the smoker down many times in order to have free hands to lift things. Little fires started popping up. At one point I had raging fires under two hives. I was running around stamping out fires, raking the flames away from the hives and listening to myself hyperventilate. Our hose is far enough away that I didn't think I could run to get it without everything going up in blazes. When I finally felt I could, I ran and got the hose and doused everything really well. I was shocked when I finally looked into the hives that had the fires under them and found that they were fine. I was sure all the wax would be melted and bees fried. Needless to say, I have a few fire

¹ “Mariticide” is the murder of a husband by his wife. “Uxoricide” is the murder of a wife by her husband. Let's avoid either one, okay?

extinguishers near our apiary these days!

Bee keeping is nothing if not an adventure or two!"

Lisa Vogel's story

"An unnoticed ember from lighting my smoker fell on the ground near a very old and rotten tree stump. It was a dry day and stayed hot enough to slowly ignite the stump and its dead roots underground, travelling up from the roots and igniting piles of dead leaves... all while we slept that night. The fire fortunately singed only the perimeter of our shed building, but I nearly caused a forest fire!

We called the fire department the next morning after discovering the smoking roots and shed with two singed sides. I had no idea that fire could travel through tree roots!

To this day I never empty a hot smoker on the ground if I can help it. I plug up the opening and leave it outside on the driveway."

Kenneth Lee's story

"It was early April and a very windy day. I needed to install two packages of bees and the weekend weather was going to be too cold and rainy to do the work. I had to hurry to get it done on Friday before dark. One package was getting installed at a neighbor's house down the street and the other at my house. I had finished the install at my house and dumped the ashes in a typical open-top metal fireplace-ashes container inside the carport. It would have been fine for indoor use (no wind), but because of the wind, it was not a good choice for outdoor ashes containment! I don't know exactly how the fire started or spread since I was installing the other package down the street. The fire was too large for a garden hose and/or fire extinguisher by the time I got back to my house.

It was a stick-built carport that burned down and all items in the carport were totaled (including a ride-on mower) as well as my parents' RV which was in the driveway. But it didn't get very close to the house thanks to the Hillsborough fire department.

Lesson learned: do not let the ashes out of a smoker until the smoker is cold to touch! I

have two smokers now -- one for each site -- and plugs for when I am done and want to leave the smoker unattended (in an area where it cannot touch flammables)."

Not just smokers: Larry Arnold's story

"I once left the house with sugar syrup on the stove with the heat on. When I returned about an hour later the house was filled with smoke, smoke detectors were blaring, and flames were shooting out the top of the pot. The syrup had boiled over and also caught fire on the burner and range top once all the water evaporated. The pot and range top were covered with solid black carbon.

My wife was not happy! If I had returned much later, I think the fire department would have been at my house.

I am no longer permitted to prepare syrup in the house."

The winner is...

Everyone agreed that Kenneth's story wins the prize. A vacant lot, charred and still smoking, is a powerful visual image!

The question to ask ourselves is: can we all learn from his experience without repeating it ourselves? From the plethora of stories that were shared with me, I'm not sure whether beekeepers, as a group, are equipped to learn from others cautionary tales without personally giving it a try! If you follow that path, don't forget to tell me about it!

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