

# UNL Extension: Acreage Insights

Acreage eNews-April 2012

<http://acreage.unl.edu>

## Why Bees?

By Marion Ellis, UNL Entomolgy Specialist



## Rewards are many for the enthusiast.

Why would anyone choose to work with thousands of stinging insects, lift heavy boxes, and get sticky? A growing number of beekeeping enthusiasts are starting new colonies despite the eclectic list of problems that befall beekeeping. I searched for authoritative guidance and here's a sampling of what I found:

**Postmaster, Anthony Frank**, at the first-day-of issue ceremony for the honey bee U.S. postage stamp, "Now here is an insect that teaches us two of life's most important lessons; one is *not to be idle*, and the other is *not to get stung*."

**William Shakespeare in *King Henry V***, "For so work the honey bees, creatures that by a rule in nature, teach the art of order to a peopled kingdom."

**Sue Hubbell in *A Book of Bees*** answers the why bees question nicely. "For a long, long time - for nearly forty years - I never had any bees. I can't think why. Everyone should have two or three hives of bees.... I have kept bees now for fifteen years, and my life is better for it."

**Lorenzo Langstroth**, whose discovery of bee space revolutionized beekeeping, wisely guided the growing industry by his counsel. The following invitation to beekeeping was given by him when he released his book, **Langstroth on the Hive and the Honey Bee**, in 1853. "I have determined in writing this book, to give facts, however wonderful, just as they are; confident that in due time they will be universally received; and hoping that the many wonders of the economy of the honey bee will not only excite a wider interest in its culture, but lead those who observe them to adore the wisdom of Him who gave them such admirable instincts."

Wow! After digesting what others have said about the "why would anyone want to keep bees" question, I began to list my own observations and experiences. Keeping honey bees allows one to be a part of the natural world that our increasingly urban society has hidden for many people. One cannot observe bees returning to their hives laden with pollen without wondering where it comes from, and beekeepers learn to recognize the plants that grace the countryside around them. Flowering plants have always brought joy to mankind; this effect is doubled when you are a beekeeper. Also, you cannot succeed with bees without understanding their biology and behavior. Human beings are a part of the natural world, and we share many of our genes with other living things. Can we truly know ourselves without an understanding of them? Honey bees provide a link to the natural world that will enrich your life.

Honey bees are superb teachers when trying to instill an environmental awareness and conservation ethic in young people. In learning about the importance of honey bee pollination, they realize how living things depend on other living things and that, while a few insects are pests, many are essential to our survival. Honey bees teach young people to be patient and gentle. Hastiness and carelessness have painful consequences, a lesson honey bees can teach you at a young age if you keep them. Honey bees are superb teachers.

Honey bees teach their keepers the virtue of cheerful labor. Langstroth advised, "Place yourself before a hive, and see the indefatigable energy of these industrious veterans, toiling along with their heavy burdens, side by side with their more youthful compeers, and then judge if, while qualified for useful labor, you ought ever to surrender yourself to slothful indulgence." I have many fond memories of extracting, supering, putting on winter cartons, and other bee labors with my two children (too many memories according to them). Honey bees provide ample opportunity to engage young people in meaningful work that will teach them valuable skills, give them confidence in their abilities, and allow them to earn spending money. The lessons learned from producing a product, learning how to prepare it for market, and perhaps, winning a blue ribbon at the county or state fair cannot be compared with assigning children mindless tasks such as emptying the trash to teach responsibility.

Honey bees have taken me out into wide-open spaces I would have never known without them. They have mired my truck in the mud in desolate places allowing my wife and me to share beautiful walks back to the paved road. They have introduced me to many wonderful beekeeping friends. I cannot imagine my life without bees. I have kept bees for 40 years, and, like Sue Hubbell, my life is better for it.