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## The Buzz about Bees

By Sophie Braccini



The wild beehive at the Shively's. Photo Sophie Braccini

The fact that her grandfather was a beekeeper, a long time ago in her native Ukraine, may have something to do with Roxy Wolosenko's attraction to the *Apis mellifera* (the Western Honeybee); but it was not until she became a Master Gardener, and got more into plant life, that the Lamorinda resident took the leap. "The whole idea of the connection between all living things became very real," she says, "bees are a part of the wild animal kingdom and we can interact with them. Having them around gives me the feel of being part of a cycle, of being part of the wilderness."

Not to mention the delicious honey she gets for her family every year.

Wolosenko has two hives in her garden. She transferred the colonies from her rural Bollinger Canyon home to suburban Lamorinda. "Bees give a better yield in our gardens because we grow flowers year round that feed them," she says. She is one of the many Lamorinda residents who have a few hives in their gardens. They get honey, and their flowers, fruit trees and vegetables get pollinated; some feel part of the fight to keep the *Apis mellifera* healthy in California.

When the Shiveleys moved to their new Lafayette home 12 years ago, they soon noticed a wild bee colony nestled in one of their oak trees. They enjoyed having them around and would have liked to capture a swarm, but they lacked the know-how. Then they found Steven Sparks, a biology professor at Ohlone College who cares for a plethora of hives - they now have three hives in their orchard. No one has ever been stung, the orchard has been producing like never before, and the Shiveleys get a pound of wild honey each year for their own use.

"There are many experienced beekeepers around, and some of them may be willing to have 'new bees' help them in their hives," says Brian Wort, president of the Mount Diablo Beekeepers Association (MDBA) - the group which serves as the main source of information for individuals wanting to start caring for bees.

According to MDBA founding member Steve Gentry, there are about 25 Lamorinda families in the group. Gentry, an Orinda resident, sells his honey in farmers market (he was featured in the July 11, 2007, issue of Lamorinda Weekly), and is one of the group's instructors.

Wolosenko is also a member of MDBA. When she decided to start keeping bees six years ago she went to Craigslid and found Walnut Creek resident Mike Stephanos, who was giving out hives.

"Beekeepers are very generous and Mike helped me get started with my hives; he recommended that I join MDBA." Wolosenko explains that the group provides training and organizes meetings that supported new beekeepers. Also a horticulturist, Wolosenko enjoys observing the bees when "they do their own thing." She thinks that the biggest problem beekeepers have is keeping other creatures from preying on the bees. "An ant attack can wipe out a whole colony in the few days," she recalls from experience.

Something similar happened in the communal Moraga Garden Farms. Bill Durkin recounts that a hive was installed in a corner of the garden for a year and made a difference in terms of yield. "They swarmed twice," he said, "but then one day, they disappeared."

Bees have been under a lot of stress. According to Sparks, the country is losing 40% of its bees to diseases and Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). "It is a very complex issue with more than one cause," explains Sparks, "when we saved bees from certain diseases we might have weakened the hives by keeping alive individuals that should have died. Plus certain pesticides are very detrimental to bees and when traces find their way into honeycombs it weakens the larvae." According to Sparks, if the country continues to lose 40% of its bees every year the situation will be catastrophic for farmers. "We will have to import massive quantities of bees from all over the world, thus creating another potential problem there." Everyone remembers the horror stories of the Africanized bees, dubbed 'killer bees.'

Wolosenko, a landscape architect with Roxy Designs, also believes that everyone can contribute to support the local bee population. "I have designed gardens for beekeepers," she says, "To determine if a garden is a good wildlife habitat you look at the air space above the plants and you see who is coming to visit." She recommends planting native plants such as Coyote Brush, because they will attract native bees, and plants such as lavender and rosemary that have a long flowering season and can help support the hives during the winter.

For those seriously interested in learning about bees, the best bet is to go to the first meeting of the season organized in January by MDBA. "We meet the second Thursday of the month at Heather Farms between January and October," explains Gentry, "interested people should come to the first meetings in January, February and March to

learn the basics, then in April, they will join the group's order for new colonies and they will be able to start their beehives." On April 15 MDBA holds a traditional workshop at which participants can obtain all they need to become active beekeepers, including a few thousand bees to set in their boxes.

"It is a wonderful experience," concludes Gentry, "you learn to see like a bee - to see the world through their unique perspective."

For more information go to  
[www.diablobees.org](http://www.diablobees.org).



Roxy Wolosenko and her 13-year old daughter, Anya, check on their bees



A bee in the Shively's garden Photos Sophie Braccini

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