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Lamorinda Nurseries Bring In The Bees

By A.K. Carroll



Sarah McDonnell and Mike Vigo with the two new bee colonies. Photos Andy?Scheck

objective in having hives. "The primary benefit is to protect the bees, to give them a safe home and to pollinate our plants."

According to Vigo, the much-lauded plight of the honeybee isn't one that will be resolved any time soon, especially considering California's current and running state of drought. The one benefit that Vigo has seen come from the increase in notoriety concerning the honeybee crisis is the monetary contribution that corporations have started making toward saving the honeybee, as well as the research being conducted in academia.

The nursery-hive relationship is one more step in the right direction. "McDonnell is fairly progressive," said Vigo, "Ahead of the curve." Through this partnership, all sides in the pollinator-producer equation win - nurseries, beekeepers, consumers and honeybees alike. "I think it's fantastic."

Orchard Nursery and Florist in Lafayette has also been aware of the importance of local bees for a while now. "A couple of years ago we had a friend of a friend put up hives on our back hill area," said Chris Martinez. "The bees seem to be very happy and are producing quite a bit of honey."

That friend was Steve Gentry, producer of Steve's Bees honey and fourth-generation resident of Orinda. Gentry has approximately 35 years of experience working with bees. He formed a relationship with Orchard when they invited him to show and talk about bees on a recent Earth Day.

"I got into [beekeeping] because I just love bees," said Gentry. "It started with education and morphed into selling honey as regional family income." Residents can find Gentry's honey at Diablo Foods, Whole Foods and Open Sesame in Lafayette, at the Orinda Farmers' Market, and in several stores and markets outside of Lamorinda.

"The hive up there is thriving," Gentry said of his Orchard swarm, which he uses more for the production of bees than the production of honey. When Gentry needs to reinforce weaker hives or divide off a new swarm to follow one of the queens he raises, the Orchard hive is a good place to go. It's also great show and tell for the local community.

The relationship benefits Orchard as well. "We have lots of fruit trees here that need pollinating," said Martinez. "And it's good to have a safe place for the bees. Bees have been all over the news and being part of the agriculture in our state, it's important to us to keep the bees happy."

The buzz about bees is spreading through Lamorinda, most recently to local nurseries, resulting in a partnership that is beyond symbiotic.

Based out of a desire to help the plight of the honeybee, McDonnell Nursery in Orinda recently purchased two hives to put on their property.

"From my standpoint it's a natural fit," said Mike Vigo, local beekeeper and owner of The Bee Ranchers, LLC. Vigo delivered and hived McDonnell's new bees the second week in April. "[The bees] are able to pollinate and help the plants in the nursery, and to the extent that the hives produce honey, [McDonnell] will have uber local honey to sell."

"I like local, in general," said Sarah McDonnell. "And honey being a product I use quite a bit, I'm always picking that up at farmers' markets." The byproduct of honey is something McDonnell is excited about, but it isn't her main

Increasing the happiness of bees and beekeepers alike, Orchard has recently started stocking beekeeping materials in its store. The first shipment came in at the start of April. They've also partnered with the Mt. Diablo Beekeepers Association, building a relationship that they hope will extend into the community. "What we hope to accomplish with that is to get our customers as aware of the situation with our pollinators as possible," said Martinez. "We're learning the process along with them."

Mount Diablo Beekeepers Association Meets Monthly

Steve Gentry is one of the founding members of the Mount Diablo Beekeepers Association, which holds monthly meetings for its members at 7 p.m. on the second Thursday of each month, January through October, at the Pleasant Hill Community Center, 320 Civic Drive, Pleasant Hill. The meetings are open to the public. For more information, visit www.DiabloBees.org.



The queen bee arrives in a cage and will be released by the worker bees after a day or two.



Orchard Nursery and Florist's retail display of equipment Photo Janet Kaidantzis



Ralph Carter installs packaged bees into the hive.

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