

Published July 26th, 2017

## Home is where the hive is

By Cathy Dausman



After the wall had been opened, bees can be removed with a modified vacuum. Photo Cathy Dausman

It's one thing to invite bees into your yard with bee-friendly flowers and trees or even host a hive or two; it's quite another to have the bees invite themselves over.

David Munson of Moraga knows firsthand what it's like to have "the girls" around (honey bees are overwhelmingly female). He jokes since they've had multiple bee hives lodged in and around their house they must be listed on some "bee B&B" vacation guide. "It started with the (front yard) olive tree," a couple years ago Munson says; and "they've been there at least two times."

This year the little stingers found a crack between the brick near the living room bay window and proceeded past the exterior wall into the insulation and built a comb up against the interior dry wall. From inside his house Munson could put his ear to the sheetrock, hear the noise, and feel a physical warmth. He called Lamorinda Weekly publisher Andy Scheck, himself a beekeeper, , warning him "they're baaaaaaack"!

Munson also called a contractor who offered to take out a section of the interior wall or cut out a piece of exterior siding to access the hive, but he didn't like the cost. Instead he and Scheck devised a plan: they'd mask off the bees' various entry and exit routes and train them to inhabit a temporary hive. When the bees got used to the hive, they installed a one-way wire mesh for exit only. The box was left in place for about two weeks, while the bees made honey in the provided wax combs. Four days before its removal Munson said there was "no warmth, no buzzing" along his inside wall. Scheck closed off the hive one night when the population went dormant and relocated it. Neither Scheck nor Munson found the queen bee.

With all the bee excitement, you'd think Munson might sour to these uninvited guests, but not so. He admits to having been stung, but insists he and his wife "don't hate bees." They see the value in fruit, flower and vegetable pollination bees provide to their fully landscaped backyard. Munson says he stood just feet away unsuited while the bees were being managed and was never stung. He did notice that solicitors delivering door hangers left them on the sidewalk away from the bees, and that his gardeners and a cable repairman gave the hive a wide berth.

Meanwhile in Lafayette, another homeowner called for help when his renter reported it was no longer safe to be in the garage. Bees had again invaded the detached garage and built a colony inside the wall. The renter, who did not wish to be named, watched nearby while two suited beekeepers pried off the inside wall. The bees had built an irregularly shaped four-foot-long hive in between the studs. The renter pointed out multiple holes along the garage exterior siding which he thought were drilled by woodpeckers, and suspects that is how the bees gained entry. The hillside home is regularly visited by local wildlife, most of it welcome, but when the bees discourage residents from even setting foot in the garage, things can get awkward. It took two suited beekeepers to vacuum the bees into a specially modified shop vacuum. The bees in the vacuum were transferred to a bee box. Finally, the combs were transferred into the box, and the old honeycomb was harvested for honey. Bees from both the Moraga and the Lafayette homes were preserved.

Orinda beekeeper Steve Gentry, owner of Steve's Bees, says removing bees safely and completely from homes is a complicated job which takes a lot of work. He says bees traditionally, historically and biologically like living in wood, and in Lamorinda there are simply more opportunities for them to inhabit the wood found in houses than trees.

To rid yourself of a home bee infestation, Gentry says it is best to find a licensed contractor who understands the process, rather than an exterminator who may or may not take the job. He estimates he has moved hundreds of swarms (not all of them home invaders) over the past 30-plus years. "It is hot, sweaty work," Gentry says. "I like playing with bees."

Removing interior sheetrock is the cheapest, fastest and cleanest way to access a hive in house walls, he says. The insulation comes out, bees are vacuumed up and the honeycombs removed. Then, Gentry says, the studs need to be thoroughly cleaned, and sprayed with two coats of oil-based primer. Otherwise, says Gentry, "even though the bees are 95 percent gone," scout bees will smell the former hive and they'll move back in. "Exterminators don't know that," he says. Gentry also recommends getting three quotes and references before hiring someone to do bee removal work.

Munson's advice to other homeowners is to look for any little hole and seal it shut. He says he's sealed so many places that he ran out of caiking. Gentry suggests homeowners check for dark spots on exterior walls and overhangs in the spring (this may indicate a hole) and keep an eye out for scout bees. "These guys will find a way in," Munson says.



Mesh attached to a pipe and reduced to a half-inch at the end was used to trap bees out of Munson's home.  
Photos Cathy Dausman



A beeswax comb with honey on the top and baby bees on the bottom was saved from the hive in the garage wall in a Lafayette home.

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[back](#)

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