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Beekeeping in the Tetons: Lots of learning with sweet rewards

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After beekeeping for a couple of seasons and leading our Teton County 4-H beekeeping and gardening club, I now realize that beekeeping is both an art and a science. The European honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) is non-native to North America but is beloved as one of nature's most important pollinator species. Honey, known for its medicinal, as well as natural sweetening properties is a bonus! I have had both successes and failures as a new "beek" with little mentorship. Beekeeping is not easily picked up. It requires a significant investment of money and time. With our short season climate, beekeeping has added challenges to keep your bees alive through the cold, windy, and wet winter months. On the plus side, due to our remoteness, open spaces, and diversity of wild habitat, bees in the Tetons can thrive and enhance our environment.

The following five tips are what I wish someone had presented to me before embarking on my beekeeping journey. I hope new beekeepers can learn from these recommendations for a more successful experience. Working within the University Extension system, I have access to an abundance of scientifically sound resources and experts. You can also join our "Teton Valley Beekeepers" group, which meets at our UI Extension, Teton County office and is active on Facebook.

1) Learn from others. Find a mentor in our area and then become a mentor to others as you gain experience. The **Teton Valley Beekeepers** group currently meets twice a year at the Extension Office in Driggs to network and provide information on local conditions and education.

2) "Bee" educated. Take a class and learn from credible resources. Get equipment and order bees well before needed. I like online classes like "Beekeeping 101" from Penn State Extension or Girl Next Door Honey (note, the latter is a treatment-free approach). Take what you read online with a grain of salt and caution. Sometimes information is inaccurate and be informed to develop your own opinions. Utilize an "Integrated Pest Management Approach" to treating your bees for diseases or pests if that is the route you decide to take, meaning go with the more natural approach before trying more intensive options. Beekeepers can be very opinionated! Recommended Websites: The National Honey Board (www.honey.com); Honeybee Health Coalition (www.honeybeehealthcoalition.org); The Magazine of American Beekeeping (www.beeculture.com); American Bee Journal (www.americanbeejournal.com); Project Apis m. (www.projectapism.org); University of Minnesota Bee Lab (www.beelab.umn.edu); and USDA Diagnosis of Honey Bee Diseases (www.ars.usda.gov/is/np/honeybeediseases/honeybeediseases.pdf).

3) Carefully consider your colony site selection. Find an area that has an abundance of vegetation and flowering plants throughout the year for forage (pollen and nectar). If keeping bees on your home property, make sure your city, county, or homeowners association allows bees. Plant pollinator friendly plants on your property including trees, shrubs, and herbaceous species. Ensure adequate water sources for your bees, and reduce exposure to pesticides (insecticides, fungicides, and herbicides). Establish open relationships with your neighbors. If you know your bees may be

exposed to pesticides, have either a relocation plan or place netting or wet fabric over your hives until the risk of pesticide exposure passes.

4) Monitor and inspect hives often, but not too much. Weather events can stress your bees. Even opening your hives is stressful for them. You may need to add boxes or “supers” during the honey flow (when one or more nectar sources are in bloom) to allow space for your growing bee population and avert swarming. During the late summer and fall, bees can struggle to find a variety of plants in bloom. Inspect and consider supplemental feeding with sugar syrup, candy blocks, or pollen substitutes. Monitor for Varroa mites and other diseases and develop treatment plans. If harvesting honey in the fall, be sure to leave enough honey for bees since that is their winter food! Be conservative since our winters are long and tough. Vigorous, healthy young bees are necessary for sustained hive health through the winter and early spring. Develop a plan for winterizing your hives.

5) Keep records of your journey and adapt as needed. Learn from your mistakes, challenges, and successes. Record your inspections, treatments, supplemental feedings, queen issues, winter preparation, etc. Inspect your bees when it is nice and sunny outside during the day since most of your bee foragers will be away collecting pollen and nectar. Use your smoker and other equipment properly, dress appropriately, and remain calm and efficient since you don’t want to add unnecessary stress to your hives or yourself. Don’t be so set in your ways that you fail to adapt. Enjoy the process and rewards and be open to sharing this knowledge with others.

Jennifer Werlin is an Extension Educator in Community Food Systems for the University of Idaho in Teton County. University of Idaho Cooperative Extension offers research-based educational programs and publications in the areas of agriculture, community development and family and consumer science. Learn more at www.uidaho.edu or call 208-354-2961. The University of Idaho does not discriminate in education or employment on the basis of human differences, as required by state and federal laws.