

# Interview with the Beekeeper

(The RIBA Newsletter)

March 2019



*Snow-capped hives on March 4 (photo: Emily Langlais)*

**T**his issue of the newsletter is going to try something new. Our primary feature will be a series of short interviews with RIBA members of various levels of experience. Some of these names will be familiar to you; others will be brand new members who haven't even hived their first bees yet. Rhode Island may be the smallest state, but that can actually be an asset. My personal belief is that forging a strong beekeeping community will help keep our individual hives strong as well. Talk to the other beekeepers in your town. Invite them over for an informal hive inspection and a cup of coffee; contacts like this are an invaluable resource. If you don't have a mentor yet, there are members out there who will be happy to help you. My intention is that this new interview feature will help to connect members who might not have met otherwise. Hopefully it will be an ongoing, if intermittent, addition to the newsletter.

There is also a longer interview with the director of our Bee Schools, Betty Mencucci. She has taught hundreds (thousands?) of RI's beekeepers over the years (myself included) and I'm grateful to be able to share her experience and insights with you.

As always, if you have ideas, comments, or questions, please contact me at [sdlanglais@gmail.com](mailto:sdlanglais@gmail.com).

-Scott Langlais

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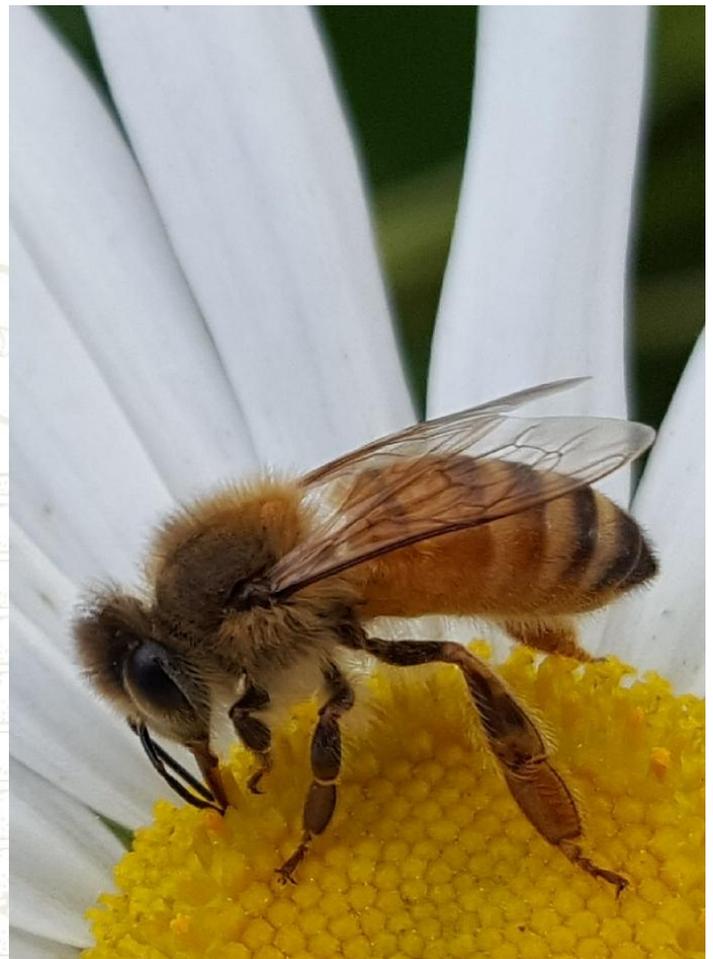
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## ***Contributors to This Issue***

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Susan Medyn, Emily Langlais, Scott Langlais

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# Interview with the Beekeeper(s)

*\*with apologies to Anne Rice*

## **Betty Mencucci**

**Town/City:** Burrilville

**How long have you been a beekeeper?** I started in 1988, so that makes 31 years

**What hive style(s) do you currently use?** All traditional 10 frame Langstroth deeps along with 5 frame nucs with mostly Italian bees

**Most memorable moment in your beekeeping experience?** A tremendous honey flow in 1993 - the year I got almost a ton of honey. I had inherited a lot of equipment and all my supers were full. I planned on extracting in July, but I fell and hurt my wrist on July 4th. I needed help. Carlo helped me put together a bunch of new supers and he wired all the frames. Then my brother helped me take the honey off the hive. It was very exciting dealing with all that honey. Catching a swarm was another memorable moment. I have an apiary at Addieville Farm where my brother, Ken, works and he called and told me I had a swarm. It was on a low branch and easy to catch. I cut the branch and put it in an empty hive box and waited about ½ hour. It looked like they would settle in and make it their home when they all came pouring out of the hive and swirled around and around and eventually landed on another branch way up in a small tree about 20 feet high. There was no way to climb the tree to catch the swarm. I was ready to give up when my brother said he could cut the tree down. So, with his chain saw he cut down the tree, but he did it very slowly and carefully so that when the tree fell, it fell over very slowly and gracefully. When the swarm hit the ground, it hit gently but was scattered in all directions. I waited and waited to see if they would re-cluster. Then I noticed about 15 bees gathered about 20 feet away from the cut tree. I looked down and saw they were gathering around the queen. I picked up the queen and put her in the hive and eventually all the bees came in and it became their new home. That's the only time I ever saw a queen in a swarm. My last memorable moment involves a little bee wrangling. One afternoon I went into someone's house after looking at the bees and I had a bee on the back of my shirt. After a few minutes, the bee flew off me and up toward the ceiling. The house is very clean and well-kept, and it has a high ceiling. I did not want the bee to poop in the house and I didn't want anyone to get stung trying to shoo it out. Without thinking, I said "Open the door." Then I said: "Now shut off the lights." Then I said: "the bee will leave." Sure enough, the bee flew out the door into the sunshine that was outside. The owner of the house looked at me in amazement and said: "That bee did what you told it to do!"



**What do you do with your honey/hive products?** I sell some at a few stores but mostly I sell to people that come to the house. I do not advertise, it's all by word of mouth

**Do you think beekeeping has changed significantly since you first got involved?** YES! First of all, there were no mites. There were very few losses, just an occasional loss due to starvation when the cluster got separated from the honey stores. Most beekeepers worried about getting too many hives due to increases when they did swarm control or the catching of swarms. I used to get lots of swarm calls, now I get almost none. I had a lot of honey and no market. It was hard to get your foot in the door somewhere to sell your honey. Most stores would not sell local honey. The public was not into "buying local." In 1988 I sold it for 1.60 a pound. Most hives had enough honey in the fall to make it through the winter. I never fed any fondant or candy in the winter. I never peeked in my hives in the winter. My bees always had enough food. The recommendation was to feed the hive two gallons of syrup in the fall with fumidil b (to protect against nosema). Most of the time, I didn't bother, the top deep was full enough and nosema was not an issue. Many times, hives in the spring still had plenty of honey in the top deep. Any feeding I did was late spring feeding in March with liquid syrup. The bees seem to be hungrier now. I'm doing more feeding than I ever did. The honey flows are different now, they used to be stronger and more consistent. I think that climate change is playing a role. There are some plants that used to have lots of foraging bees and now I don't see so many bees on them.

***I had a lot of honey and no market. It was hard to get your foot in the door somewhere to sell your honey. Most stores would not sell local honey.***



*Betty demonstrates frame construction during one of her classes.*  
(photo: Emily Langlais)

**It sounds like beekeeping is significantly more challenging now than when you started. Is it still fun for you despite the "new" pressures of varroa, small hive beetle, etc?** Yes, it is more challenging and more frustrating knowing how it used to be. I enjoy the other fun part of beekeeping – looking at different bee behaviors, what they're bringing in, seeing them raise new queens, etc. Checking for mites all the time is more of a chore. It takes some of the fun out of beekeeping because you're either hurting or killing bees doing mite checks or you're exposing the bees to some type of chemicals in a mite treatment. Both are undesirable but necessary jobs in the beeyard.

**What is the most common mistake you see new beekeepers making?** Most beekeepers don't think they have a mite issue and let it slide until it's too late. The hive looks so big and healthy in the summer; they can't possibly believe that it is loaded with mites and viruses and that it will crash in the fall or winter.

**What has been working for you as far as testing/treating?** Just being diligent in doing the testing and applying treatments that are right under the current circumstances (taking into consideration temperature, brood size, time of year, whether there's a honey flow, severity of infestation) when appropriate. You have to keep on top of it all the time.

**With all the new pests and problems bees have to face in 2019, what gives you hope for the future of honey bees in America?** There is so much more new research than ever before. There is always hope that they will breed a better mite resistant bee or that new treatments will arise that are safer and easier to use.

**How has RIBA changed since you first became a member?** When I first joined there were about 10 to 15 attending a meeting. There was little interest in beekeeping, it was becoming a dying art. It was a group of mostly retired men. Most members felt like they knew what they needed to know about beekeeping and went to meetings to socialize or to visit other beekeeper's houses to see how their hives were set up or to visit their gardens. There were no mites. I attended the bee school in 1988. It was a 4-week class (2-hour sessions). There was one class with about 20 students taught by Charlie McKellar. After that there were short classes at various times to learn about the pests (mites) that were coming and about using chemicals in the hive. There was never any emphasis to

*It was difficult when the mites first came; a lot of beekeepers lost their hives and ended up quitting.*

learn about other aspects of beekeeping (making nucs, dealing with swarming, how to requeen). I liked to learn and went to every EAS for a week's worth of learning. It didn't take long and I was one of the experts in the group. Some of the

older men called me the "spark plug" of the organization because I talked about bees in a more exciting way and encouraged RIBA to do new and different things. It was difficult when the mites first came; a lot of beekeepers lost their hives and ended up quitting.

**You mentioned that RIBA was mostly retired men when you joined. Was there any resistance to women in the organization?** No there was no resistance to women. There were a few women that kept bees but not many. It was mostly a retirement hobby for men. Most of the time it was the man who kept the bees and the wife went to the meetings or banquet to keep her husband company. At EAS they used to have a ladies' luncheon on Thursday. A bunch of the wives would sign up to go on a special bus tour or a shopping event and have a nice lunch somewhere while their husbands learned about bees at the conference. Later as more women got involved, it was changed to a spouses' luncheon and then after that, they stopped having them.

**You've been attending the EAS conference for over 30 years. What was the most memorable EAS for you?** 1991 New Bern, North Carolina. It was the first one that was far from home. My mother and I did a lot of fun things before the conference. The highlights were our visit to Cape Hatteras when I went hang gliding and our visit to the Elizabethan gardens at Roanoke. EAS was special as one afternoon was scheduled at the Tryon Palace. They had stations demonstrating skep beekeeping by Don Hopkins with real bees in a skep, Bob Cole did a bee lining demo and there was colonial candle dipping. We had a great outdoor pig roast by the river. The short course was fantastic. There was so much to learn when you first start so everything is new and exciting. There were 10 of us from Rhode Island (all are deceased now except my mother and me). I also have to include EAS 2002 at Cornell University in New York. My mother was 79 and we hiked to all the waterfalls in the Ithaca area and went swimming in the pools at the base of some of the falls before the conference. At Cornell I got to see the Dyce Lab. One day was scheduled with an

outdoor lab in the bee yard. Several tents were set up at classrooms. So we had a class under the tent and then walked outside to work with the bees. It was here that they did demonstrations with queens and drones mating as we were right under a drone congregation area. It was so exciting. It's the only time I have ever seen a DCA!

**Favorite speaker (on bees) that you've heard?** Tom Seeley and Wyatt Mangum

**What do you do for a day job?** Retired teacher

**Other hobbies besides beekeeping?** Travel, tennis, bicycling, gardening, historical research, my husband and I spend a lot of volunteer hours doing historical cemetery restoration where we repair and reset old gravestones and fix up old graveyards. I have been president of the Burrillville Historical & Preservation Society since 2002 and also serve on the Board of the Burrillville Land Trust.

**Favorite movie?** Wizard of Oz

**Favorite band or musician?** Moody Blues

**Favorite book or author?** James Fennimore Cooper's Leather Stocking Tales (Deerslayer, Pathfinder, Last of the Mohicans, etc.)

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## ***Cheryl Nelson***

**Town/City:** Foster

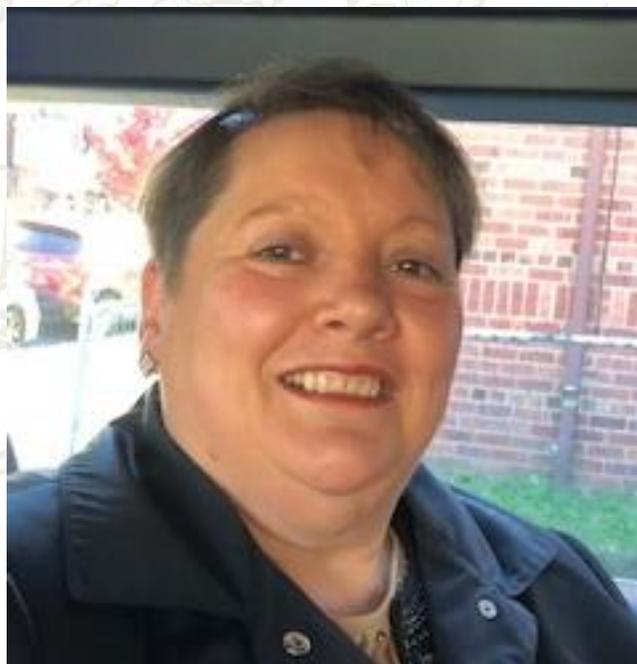
**How long have you been a beekeeper?** 6 years and loving it.

**What hive style(s) do you currently use?**  
Langstroth 10 frame, 2 deep brood boxes with medium supers for honey collection

**Favorite speaker (on bees) that you've heard?**  
Betty Mencucci's teaching in bee school

**Most memorable moment in your beekeeping experience?** Watching a couple honey bees try to pollinate an embroidered flower on my blouse.

**What do you do with your honey/hive products?**  
I sell to friends, give away to family and neighbors.



**What's the one thing you know now that you wish you knew when you got your first hive?**

What an awesome hobby beekeeping is. I find that it is calming and just fascinating.

**Any words of advice or tips for a brand new beekeeper?** There are a lot of opinions and it's important to know where your advice comes from. Beekeeping can be very local. Keeping bees takes time and effort, it's not going to be a success if you think today's bees can manage themselves.

**What do you do for a day job?** I'm a retired. Now I'm a stay at home dog mom.

**Other hobbies besides beekeeping?** Gardening, knitting, loving my fur babies and being a good neighbor.

**Favorite movie?** Sleepless in Seattle

**Favorite band or musician?** Love all types of music.

**Favorite book or author?** Any author/book with mystery and intrigue.

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**Lisa Schultz**

**Town/City:** Warwick

**Why do you want to keep bees?** I think bees and their life cycle are fascinating. Truly a community, where every action by the bees is done for the greater good. My father had hives when I was younger; I did not participate in the beekeeping, but did reap the rewards (honey)! My mother's parents had a dairy farm and they also had bees.

**What hive style(s) do you plan to use?** I have two deeps for brood, one with wood frames and one with plastic. I have a Flow style deep/frames for any super honey. I am going to get a medium (per Glenn's suggestion) for a super as well. In addition, I just

ordered an Apimaye bottom board. Obviously, I like to try new things :) It does seem that the more established beekeepers are very resistant to trying new styles of hives or hive parts. Whenever a new beekeeper asks on the facebook page if anyone is using or trying something new, there is a thunderous chorus that they should use traditional beekeeping hives, reasoning that the new beekeeper will be able to ask questions and they will be able to answer them. However, none of the long time apiarist replies "I am not using that style/type, but would love to see it in action, if you go that way, I would like to see it". Why so resistant to change or improvements? Why buy a bunch of equipment that you plan on swapping out? I have done a bit of researching, and I haven't found a bunch of failed beekeeping equipment, so it doesn't seem likely to be past failures. There almost seems to be an attitude that everyone should fail at first before succeeding.

**Do any aspects of beekeeping seem especially confusing or challenging to you?** I have been reading everyone's posts, and it seems that a ton of people lost hives this past year. It seems to me that buying packages from the almond groves might not be a great idea? I just read an article

about how 40% of the commercial bees died this past year, and they are suggesting that it is due to a mixture of pesticides and fungicides used in the almond groves that, individually, were safe, but in combination, were lethal to bees. I am very surprised that I haven't seen any discussion regarding this on the Facebook page? And I am wondering if it has to do with the upcoming sale of packages.

As a practical question, I did not have any luck luring my bees into the flow frames this past year. Since the members of RIBA seem very resistant to this type of hive, I am finding online assistance from other areas of the country (Yay internet!). I definitely put the super on too late last year, as everyone on the RIBA page seemed to indicate that it would be unlikely to get "Extra" honey the first yet, so this year, I am going to coat the frames with bee's wax and get the super on earlier.

**Have you connected with a mentor yet?** No I have not. I would love a mentor, but it would have to be someone really forward thinking :) Seems unlikely through RIBA (Flow Hive = Distain) but I am having some luck online.

**What do you do for a day job?** Criminal Intelligence Analyst

**Other hobbies besides beekeeping?** I finished the Master Gardener course last year, so gardening is a huge passion of mine, and it goes really well with beekeeping. It's a great volunteer opportunity, as well. My neighbors are putting in a pollinator garden this year, knowing I am trying to keep bees and support the pollinators. I love the hiking trails here in RI (I am from WI originally) I also have three rescued dogs that I sometimes take along.

**Favorite movie?** Meatballs

**Favorite band or musician?** Dusty Springfield or Willie Nelson

**Favorite book or author?** Short stories by Saki are great.

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## **Jon Foster**

**Town/City:** North Scituate

**How long have you been a beekeeper?**  
Entering 7th season

**What hive style(s) do you currently use?**  
Langs: Deeps and Mediums

**Favorite speaker (on bees) that you've heard?** Michael Palmer

**Most memorable moment in your beekeeping experience?** 2014 Season:  
Harvested over 110 lbs of honey from one hive. The girls had filled a medium super in a week and then refilled it again, in the next 10 days.



**What do you do with your honey/hive products?** I give away lots of honey to friends and family and consume the rest. I am down to my last gallon from the 2014 season. Presently, I am recycling old comb and have two five gallon pails full of comb to process for bees wax.

**What's the one thing you know now that you wish you knew when you got your first hive?** Better hive health management during spring and summer, including varroa treatment.

**Any words of advice or tips for a brand new beekeeper?** Never give up! In the learning process of "keeping" bees, you do lose/kill off a lot of bees. If you are truly committed to having a sustainable apiary, you need make sure you get your packages through the first year and overwinter successfully. Hive health, including proper treatment for disease is paramount. The second season, you need to split your hives and have nuc(s) for replacement of failed queens, sick hives and/or for apiary increase. I lost my three hives in 2018 due to moisture issues and took a year off to think about what I need to do to insure success. I am back, with a plan and bees for 2019! Once you are truly "stung" with having bees in your life, you know this is something you were meant to do.

**What do you do for a day job?** Lucky me, I just retired, working the last dozen years for a software company. Now I can be much more focused on my bees and apiary and pursue my other projects with reckless abandon.

**Other hobbies besides beekeeping?** I enjoy cycling, gardening, Ham radio, and reading non-fiction....history and biography

**Favorite movie?** Don't have a favorite movie, but enjoy the golden age of Hollywood and foreign films. I tend to watch documentaries and YouTube how-to videos.

**Favorite band or musician?** Pat Metheny

**Favorite book or author?** David McCullough "1776" "John Adams" "Truman"



## **Alessandro Corte**

**Town/City:** Gloucester

**Why do you want to keep bees?** Because it will be a hobby for me and also I would enjoy to start a little business with it.

**What hive style(s) do you plan to use?** Starting with three Langstroth bee hives

**Do any aspects of beekeeping seem especially confusing or challenging to you?** I actually feel very confident knowing also that the members of RIBA are easy to reach out to for support.

**Have you connected with a mentor yet?** Not yet, but I will

**What do you do for a day job?** Team Leader of produce

for Wholefoods Market

**Other hobbies besides beekeeping?** Gardening, fishing, forager of mushrooms, raising chickens

**Favorite movie?** The Godfather

**Favorite band or musician?** Bruno Mars

**Favorite book or author?** A Man in Full, Tom Wolfe

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## ***Calvin Alexander***

**Town/City:** Warwick, Rhode Island

**How long have you been a beekeeper?**

I've been a beekeeper for three years; I'm looking forward to my fourth year as a beekeeper.

**What hive style(s) do you use?** I currently use only Langstroth hives.

**Favorite speaker (on bees) that you've heard?** I cannot decide who is my favorite speaker that I've heard thus far. Two speakers do stand out; Mike Palmer and Dr. Tom Seeley. I love Mike Palmer's presentations; he's very blunt and practical. He shares his wealth of beekeeping experience that can be adopted by any beekeeper regardless of size of operation and experience. Dr. Tom Seeley is very knowledgeable and has a wonderful scientific mind. He translates complex scientific concepts and research into easily understood presentations.

**Most memorable moment in your beekeeping experience?** The most memorable moment for me was finding two queens laying eggs on the same frame. You expect to extract honey at some point as a beekeeper but nothing prepares you for the sight of two well mated queens actively laying ON THE SAME FRAME.

**What do you do with your honey/hive products?** We keep some honey for home use and sell to our neighbors, friends, family and coworkers. Some honey is given as Christmas gifts. I do render beeswax and we've recently made a batch of lip balm, the goal to make soaps and candles in the future.

**One thing you wish you knew when you got your first hive?** I wish I had known more about interpreting what your bees are trying to tell you. This skill guides your implementation of appropriate management actions. As a new beekeeper one must be aware that your bees do not always follow "the rules". During your routine hive inspection your bees offer many clues that may or may not match textbook predictions. Thus, you must be able to read what your bees are trying to



tell you and apply the appropriate management action in a timely manner – the bees won't wait for you.

**Any words of advice for a brand new beekeeper?** I would encourage new beekeepers to learn as much as they can about these social insects. They should find a mentor and become involved in RIBA. The first year can be difficult but having an experienced person in your corner would help you overcome these challenges. There's an abundance of knowledge and resources within RIBA and we all want to see fellow beekeepers do well.

**What do you do for a day job?** I'm a Field Scientist at the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). I provide field support, collect oceanographic and fish biological data from commercial fishing vessels and I also do some data entry and QA/QC. I also staff various fisheries research surveys ranging from the Gulf of Maine to Southern New England and the Mid-Atlantic regions.

**Other hobbies besides beekeeping?** I consider myself a cyclist and typically ride 1200 miles a year. I also enjoy photography.

**Favorite movie?** The Usual Suspects

**Favorite band or musician?** I do not have a clear favorite musician or band but I love reggae band Steel Pulse, singer Damian Marley and calypso singer Machel Montano.

**Favorite book or author?** Mark Kurlansky is my favorite author. His books address my curious mind, I get answers to "who, what, where, when and why".

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## Beekeeper's Almanac

After avoiding serious snowfall for almost the entirety of winter, RI finally got walloped during the early morning hours of March 3rd. Estimates ranged up to 17" on the high end in a few locales, according to the [Providence Journal](#).

Overwintered bees are approaching the home stretch. It is critical that hives don't run out of stores before natural food sources are widely available. Clusters will have moved from bottom boxes to upper boxes as spring approaches. Bees in upper boxes may be exhausting their supply of stored honey. Fondant, candy boards, and even dry table sugar can be placed directly on the top bars as an inexpensive insurance policy against starvation.



A healthy winter cluster.

(photo: Emily Langlais)



*Forager on witch hazel.* (photo: Susan Medyn)

Pollen, stored in smaller quantities than honey, is also likely to be in short supply. Brood rearing has started already in overwintered hives and nurse bees require the protein and lipids found in pollen to produce brood food. Winter bees do have an internal supply of these nutrients that they draw upon when natural pollen is unavailable—vitellogenin, which is stored in their fat bodies. These organs are larger in winter bees and contribute to their longevity, as well as being a reservoir of nutrients. Commercial (or homemade) pollen patties can be fed now to supplement the amount of protein available. Adult bees are known to consume brood in periods where there is insufficient nutrition to care for the young, so pollen patties are a cheap hedge against this possibility. Checking and replenishing feed on top of a hive should literally take seconds and can be done safely in all but the very coldest weather—don't think that you need to wait for a "nice day" to check feed.

Susan Medyn has reported some varieties of witch hazel blooming as early as January 1 in Tiverton. Other cultivars began blooming in February. The next few months will see maple, willow, skunk cabbage, crocus, dandelions, snow drops, and Siberian squill blooming, among others. These early blooming plants will provide your colonies with the fuel needed to expand their populations, but are unlikely to produce a surplus. A large population of healthy bees is a prerequisite to maximizing honey production however, so building strong colonies in preparation of the spring's honey flows is a necessary component of reaping the best possible honey harvest. The challenge, of course, is to encourage big, robust colonies for honey production, while also making sure they don't get TOO big and decide to swarm. That will be the main challenge going into April and subsequent months.

When to unwrap hives is a typical question that starts being asked as the weather warms up. In general, I recommend keeping hives wrapped until night time temperatures are typically in the 50s. Extremely populous colonies will be able to regulate internal temperatures (for brood rearing) better than small colonies. If you put inserts in your screened bottom boards for the winter, I would also leave them in until the same weather conditions are met (typically around mid May). The adult bees can certainly survive without hive wraps or bottom board inserts, but what you want to avoid is chilling the brood at the time of year when the colony needs to build its population. Continue to keep bottom entrances clear of dead bees. Entrances should stay reduced to smaller winter openings until there is a large enough population of bees to defend the colony against robbers and other pests and predators. The end of the tunnel is almost in sight, but we still have a good 6-8 weeks to go. The official first day of spring is March 20, 2019.



*Soon!*

# Healthy Winter Bees!

At Mass. Beekeepers Association Fall Meeting last November, Dr. Jamie Ellis did something that was very effective – he marched back and forth across the front of the auditorium proclaiming “Varroa mites are killing your bees!” over and over. Everyone there remembered this. He’s right – they are. But all is not lost; we can improve our survival rates if we work at it. I think that understanding a problem goes a long way toward fixing it. So add a picture of me, marching back and forth in front of the hall, chanting: “Healthy winter bees! Healthy winter bees!”

Lately, I’ve seen posts asking questions ranging from “Why did my bees die? I treated for mites” to “Why does it matter what parts of the bee varroa mites feed on?” to “When is the right time to treat for mites anyway?” The answers are related - It’s all about healthy winter bees!

You may be somewhat familiar with the idea of “fat bees” – the workers that live for an extended period of time and carry the colony through the winter until spring when new brood can be raised. Honey bees have “fat bodies,” sections of tissue in the abdomen which act in a similar way to our liver and also store fat, glycogen, proteins and enzymes. In the summer, the fat bodies are small or nonexistent in workers, but in the early fall when natural pollen supplies are getting short, a new batch of workers are raised - workers with enlarged fat bodies, and these are the workers that will live through until spring. We call them “fat bees” or “winter bees”.

The secret is a compound called vitellogenin, which resides in the bees’ fat bodies. Vitellogenin is a glycolipoprotein, having properties of a sugar, a fat and a protein. I’m not going to get too technical, I’m not a scientist. I do know that it has some very important qualities. It serves an immune system function. It acts as an antioxidant that prolongs the bees’ lifespan. And it allows nurse bees to make royal jelly even when there’s no natural pollen available. You can see that this bee “fountain of youth” (Randy Oliver, Fat Bees, pt. 1) plays a critical role in raising...Healthy Winter Bees!

Dr. Sam Ramsey proved Dr. Dennis VanEnglesdorp’s theory that varroa mites feed on the fat bodies of the bee rather than the hemolymph (blood).<sup>\*</sup> Varroa populations tend to maximize in



August/September – when the winter bees are being raised! This was the “light bulb” moment during Sam’s presentation at Bristol County in August 2017. The vitellogenin stores in the winter bees are compromised by the Varroa mites feeding on them. Lower vitellogenin levels shorten the lifespan of the winter bees, so colony populations dwindle in the late winter, and, since the nurse bees’ ability to make food for the new brood is compromised, there are few new bees being added to the population, right when they need it. Perhaps that explains how your bees died – they seemed to be making it through January, no varroa

*Properly timed mite treatments are critical for rearing healthy winter bees (photo: Ed Szymanski)*

collapse occurred – you thought they were going to be ok, but the population decreased until they weren't able to keep warm. The cold did not really kill your bees, though – the mites did! (*Cue Jamie*).

So what can we do? This teaches us is that our varroa mite levels must be under control by mid-to-late August. I have heard people say “If you haven't treated for mites by August 15, your bees are going to die”. I disagree with that, but you do need to know what your mite levels are at this critical time. How can you know when to treat if you don't know your mite load? I feel that it is critically important to test for varroa mite levels, preferably using an alcohol wash, at least monthly, and make your treatment decisions based on actual counts. If we're getting low (1 or 2 mites/300 bees) counts on August 15, we're not going to treat. We're going to test again on Sept. 1st. We like to use the formic acid products (MAQS or Formic Pro), but only once, when they need it most. This past year, our counts didn't reach treatable levels until Sept. 15. I will not use my most powerful treatment when they don't need it. And if you only do a late treatment, without knowing what the August/September levels were, you may kill a bunch of mites, but it will give a false sense of security because your winter bees are already compromised. A late fall oxalic acid (drip or vapor) treatment helps to knock down the winter mite population, ensuring your spring brood will start with low levels of varroa, but the mites must be under control well before that or you may not *have* any bees left to worry about in the spring.



*Thermal image of a properly prepared colony of healthy bees going into the winter. Hot spot is the cluster.*  
(photo: Ed Szymanski)

I will continue to test, observe, and make decisions based on those results and will never keep bees strictly by the calendar. It doesn't work. Things are always changing; we need to be aware of what's happening in our colonies at all times.

As late summer comes, remember to monitor your food stores as well. Pollen and nectar can be short in August/September, just when your bees need the best possible nutrition they can get. Food shortages may cause queens to suspend laying, and if she doesn't recover in time, the winter bee population will be decreased. Let all of your late season beekeeping activities have the same goal in mind :

## **HEALTHY WINTER BEES!**

*\*Editor's note: see [Dec 2018 newsletter](#), pg. 11, for a recap of Dr Ramsey's groundbreaking findings*

*-Ed Szymanski*

# Meeting Recaps

**M** The January 13, 2019 General Membership Meeting started with a short presentation by RIBA member Paul Scungio. This past season, Paul used a butane insect fogger to treat his hive for mites with a mix of oxalic acid and grain alcohol after seeing a video on the internet. During one of these treatments, Paul blew up a beehive, killing his bees and nearly killing himself in the process. Paul's presentation served as a very good reminder that it is important to use only approved treatments for mite control. This is important both for the health of the bees and the safety of the beekeeper. It was generous of Paul to share this mishap as a warning to those who may be tempted to do otherwise.



*The charred remains of a hive after being destroyed by using an off-label mite treatment technique*

Roger Robitaille announced that bee packages were coming in on May 3rd and encouraged members to get their orders in. This was followed by an announcement of the schedule of meetings to come, which can be found on the RIBA website. Phil and Malinda Coletta kindly offered to audit the financial books after a request was made for this yearly need.



Max Weagle from Worcester County gave a presentation "Monitoring Your Hives During the Winter." He had a variety of hive monitoring equipment on display and shared his experiences, both positive and negative, with their use. Many customized solutions are available to beekeepers (including Brood Minder, BeeBot, Arnia hive monitors, Flir infrared cameras, etc) but Max found better success using a "homebrew" application of Amazon remote temperature and humidity sensors. He stated that if the temperature of your hive is ten degrees warmer than the outside temps, this typically means that your hive is still alive. Max also recommended that lithium batteries be used instead of alkaline for the monitors as these batteries will last longer in the cold. It was also stated that loose hive wrappings can interfere with FLIR imaging.

**T**he February 10, 2019 General Membership Meeting kicked off with the first new-bee meeting of the year. These Q&A sessions are directly tailored to the needs and questions of new beekeepers. The session was hosted by Keith

Salisbury, Stephen Burke, Betty Mencucci and Sara Michaud, Cornell Master Beekeeper. The main topics of discussion were choosing hive styles and deciding between the purchase of a package or a nucleus colony to start out. This was followed by a discussion about the distinct advantages/disadvantages to both.

The meeting proper opened with a request from Keith Salisbury, RIBA President, for someone to head a Field Day committee to organize the RIBA Field Day to be held in June. This was followed by an announcement that Stephen Burke, RIBA Secretary, was featured again on an episode of White House Chronicles, which can be viewed online.

Lou Chasse of Cottage Industries invited attendees to the beekeeping workshops he holds every third Saturday of the month, which is free to attend. Sara Michaud and Sherri Mathieu also announced that they will continue to invite beekeepers to hive inspections at their farm in Charlestown. These sessions will be posted on the RIBA Facebook page. Cindy Holt announced that the RIBA Apiary will be providing opportunities for new beekeepers to gain hands on experience as well. She asked that new beekeepers who are interested give her their email address.

Scott Langlais, EAS Master Beekeeper and Vice President of RIBA gave an informative presentation "Honey Bees: Beyond the Basics". Scott provided a thorough overview of the anatomical and behavioral specializations in the both individual honey bee and the beehive as superorganism that helps the species survive and thrive. Several areas, such as reproduction, defense, brood rearing, hive construction, and foraging were examined in relation to how the honey bee's biological adaptations allow them to perform tasks. For instance, the antennae contain sensory receptors for scent, taste, touch, CO2 detection, hearing, and more. Thus the antennae come to play a crucial role in many different facets of hive life (detecting diseased brood under cappings, becoming alert to needs of hive defense, communication of food sources, maintaining queenright status, and much much more). The wings, beyond simply providing a means of locomotion, also serve critical functions in brood rearing (by fanning wings the colony can regulate the proper temperature within the hive), defense (by fanning alarm pheromone at the hive entrance), colony-level immunity (again, by fanning, to increase hive temperature in response to a chalkbrood infection for instance), and more.

*-Cindy Holt*

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## Successful Mentor/Mentee Relationships

**S** Beekeeping has a steep learning curve. One can read all the books, research articles and attend RIBA meetings, listening to local experienced beekeepers and national speakers, but nothing compares to hands-on learning. Mentoring is the forum for hands-on learning as it is informal teaching based upon modeling behavior. There are benefits for both the mentor and the mentee. As the mentor describes rationale for certain actions or hive manipulations it gives the mentee the opportunity to ask questions to fill in their learning. The mentor may find they need to analyze their actions deeper or do some additional research to provide the most accurate and articulate answer. Everyone learns! For a new beekeeper a mentor is essential to aid in learning for at least the first full season.

There are steps that both the mentor and mentee need to take to maximize this learning and have a successful beekeeping season:

1. Both the mentor and mentee need to be respectful of each other's time. Mentees should not expect mentors to come to their aid on short notice, answer phone calls or emails at all hours of the day. Limitations should be set at the onset of the relationship so each knows where the boundaries are. Mentees should be respectful that the mentor is taking time to assist them and put in as much time on their own to continue to learn (attend meetings, read the books, etc.). Mentors need to respect a mentee's time by going slower, at the best pace for the mentee to learn. While a mentor may be able to spot eggs or a queen quickly, a mentee may not and the mentor must be patient and allow the mentee time to learn.
2. The mentor needs to be able to provide a comfortable environment where the new beekeeper can freely ask questions. However, the new beekeeper mentee should not rely on the mentor for answering ALL of their questions. They should attend RIBA meetings, seek out opportunities to work with other beekeepers, and read journals and books.



*The RIBA Apiary offers opportunities for hands-on learning throughout the year (photo: Emily Langlais)*

3. The mentee needs to do their homework prior to scheduled meetings. The mentee should have several goals that they would like to accomplish for the meeting. Early in the season these goals maybe learning to light a smoker efficiently (even before the bees arrive), or identifying the castes of bees, eggs, and larvae. Later in the season it may be how to properly mite test, assess for readiness to swarm, assessing for adding additional brood boxes, etc.
4. Every mentor needs to listen to the mentee to learn what their needs are (hence the mentee needing goals). The mentee should dictate how the meeting goes based upon what their needs are and then the needs of the hive. The new beekeeper's first year priority is learning.
5. Mentors should try to stick to common practices based upon what is taught in the beginner and intermediate bee schools. This will help the mentee best learn from multiple mentors if

there is consistency. It also then helps the mentee ask for help with an issue. If the hive has been cared for with common practices it allows a much wider audience to give input. If the hive has been cared for with an unknown intervention less people will have experience with that intervention and aid will be limited.

6. After each meeting the mentee should take the time to review what has been learned. Taking photos of frames and reviewing later will help.
7. Mentors should feel comfortable with saying "I don't know!" There is no one person that knows everything about beekeeping! The mentor however should know how and where to assist the mentee in finding the answer to their questions.
8. The mentor needs to provide positive feedback and constructive criticism. The mentee needs to process and learn from this criticism without being offended. For example, if the new beekeeper is handling frames gently and with good technique they should be given positive feedback for the technique, however, if they are banging frames, moving too quickly etc. they will need constructive criticism and perhaps a demonstration so they can improve upon their handling skills.
9. Have fun! This whole process should be a time of enjoyment, not stress.

I highly recommend ALL new beekeepers find a mentor. It can be someone with one year of experience or forty years. Everyone can learn in an encouraging and respectful manner if these few steps are followed. I also encourage all new beekeepers to observe as many hive inspections with different people as possible. The RIBA Apiary, the Field Day, and other summer meetings are all located on properties with bees and hive inspections are done either as a part of the meeting or after the meetings. Help more experienced beekeepers with the heavy lifting and get some knowledge at the same time!

-Sara Michaud

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# U pcoming Events

## APRIL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Sat Apr 27th 2:00pm - 4:00pm **SPECIAL SATURDAY MEETING!**

Coventry Recreation Center, 1227 Main St, Coventry, RI 02816

Speaker: **Dr. Jamie Ellis** "*Keeping Your Hives Alive*"

Dr. Ellis is the Gahan Endowed Professor of Entomology in the Department of Entomology and Nematology at the University of Florida. At the University of Florida, Dr. Ellis has responsibilities in extension, instruction and research related to honey bees. Regarding his extension work, Dr. Ellis created the UF, South Florida, and Caribbean Bee Colleges, and the UF Master Beekeeper Program. As an instructor, Dr. Ellis supervises Ph.D. and masters students in addition to offering an online course in apiculture. Dr. Ellis and his team conduct research projects in the fields of honey bee husbandry, conservation and ecology, and integrated crop pollination.

**THIS IS A MEMBERS ONLY EVENT!!!!**

***RSVP for Saturday - email malindacoletta@yahoo and she will send a confirmation you need to bring to get in.***

## ANNUAL SPRING BANQUET (MEMBERS ONLY!)

Sun Apr 28th 12:00pm - 4:00pm

Richmond Country Club, 74 Sandy Pond Rd, Hope Valley, RI 02832

Speaker: **Dr. Jamie Ellis** "*Nucs: The Most Underutilized Tool in Beekeeping*"

Dr. Ellis is the Gahan Endowed Professor of Entomology in the Department of Entomology and Nematology at the University of Florida. At the University of Florida, Dr. Ellis has responsibilities in extension, instruction and research related to honey bees. Regarding his extension work, Dr. Ellis created the UF, South Florida, and Caribbean Bee Colleges, and the UF Master Beekeeper Program. As an instructor, Dr. Ellis supervises Ph.D. and masters students in addition to offering an online course in apiculture. Dr. Ellis and his team conduct research projects in the fields of honey bee husbandry, conservation and ecology, and integrated crop pollination.



Go to <http://ribeekeeper.org/store> to order your dinner.

Final meal selections must be made by **Friday April 19th**  
ABSOLUTELY NO MONEY TAKEN AT THE DOOR!

Choice of:

Prime Rib \$25

Atlantic Pan Seared Salmon \$20

Vegan Vegetable Tower \$20

Each meal comes with:  
Baked Potato with Fresh Vegetable Medley  
Coffee/Tea and Dessert

For those mailing a check your check must be post marked by Monday April 15th.

Mail check to:

Malinda Coletta

41 Lookout Ave

North Providence RI 02911

- May 19: General Membership Meeting at Coventry Rec Center
- June 9: **RIBA ANNUAL FIELD DAY** at Salisbury Farm
- July 15-19: EAS, Greenville, SC <http://www.easternapiculture.org/conferences/eas-2019.html>
- July 21: General Membership Meeting, location TBA
- August: no meeting
- September 8: General Membership Meeting, location TBA