Honey bees are opportunists. Honey bees work together toward a common goal. Beekeepers are opportunists, too. Faced with the shutdown of in-person meetings in March 2020 because of the Covid pandemic, many bee clubs adapted to use Zoom, a previously little known video conferencing platform that has now become a household word.

RIBA started holding monthly meetings using Zoom. We found that it was often easier to get speakers from across the country because travel and overnight stays weren’t necessary. Soon, we started to share links to our meetings with other clubs, and they did the same. There’s now plenty of opportunities to hear great speakers several nights a week through reciprocal sharing between clubs.

In Norfolk County Mass., we started an Intermediate level bee school in 2020 and charged a nominal, reasonable fee to attend. Through the income we generated, we were able to increase our Zoom attendance limits to 500 and buy a subscription in a video hosting service to archive class recordings and share links to them later. Because of our newfound relationships with the other area bee clubs we decided to offer the Intermediate program to all, and on March 3rd we start with 285 students from all over New England, many from RIBA included.

I have long observed that, like the bees, beekeepers work together toward common goals. In the case of beekeeper education, the pandemic allowed us to discover a way for beekeeping associations to work together and make great advances in establishing community and educating our members. That’s a good thing. I look forward to face-to-face meetings and live bee demonstrations, but I also think that virtual conferences are here to stay, and we will continue to work together and use these tools to our benefit.

-Ed Szymanski
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Photos are by the respective authors, except where noted

RIBA Officers

President: Scott Langlais
Vice President: Sara Michaud
Secretary: Stephen Burke
Treasurer: Jennifer Bristol
Member-at-Large: Kevin Kennedy

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Bee School Director: Betty Mencucci
Presentations: Calvin Alexander
RIBA Apiary: Cindy Holt
Webmaster: Sara Colt
Photography: Emily Langlais
Programs: Ed Szymanski
EAS Director: Cindy Holt
Newsletter Editor: Ed Szymanski
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Photo Journalist: Emily Langlais
Membership: Lynn Davignon

The RIBA LIBRARY
80+ Titles and growing!
RIBA is constantly adding to its collection of beekeeping literature, comprised of the most up-to-date works on a wide variety of subjects. These books are free to borrow for any valid RI library card-holder.

The books you want can be picked up from whatever branch is most convenient for you. Simply navigate to https://catalog.oslri.net/ to begin your search. Enter keyword “RIBA” and narrow the focus to Greenville.

Contributors to This Issue:
Cindy Holt, Scott Langlais, Ed Szymanski
Beekeeper’s Almanac – Is it Spring Yet?  NO!

Ok, we’re almost through another winter, right? We’re not out of the woods yet, as February can be harsh, but things are looking up. Varroa-related health issues should now be behind us. It’s time to be looking out for food stores in the hives. If you weighed your hives or lifted them to get a feel for the weight in the late Fall, check again now and see if any are noticeably light. Whether you use infrared or stethoscope, it’s good to know where the cluster is located, as that is a good indication of how much honey still remains above them. There was honey above them in the late fall, right?? Lift the top cover on a not-too-cold day and see if they’re up in the sugar. If the fondant or sugar is covered in bees, this is a good indication of depleted honey stores in the hive. You’ll have to keep after the feed now if they’re going to make it to spring.

If you haven’t added any supplemental sugar yet, and the bees are coming up through the inner cover hole, you’d better feed them soon, because they are likely starving. On the other hand, if you’ve got bees alive, and you don’t see any on top of the upper frames, they are still clustered down lower with honey stores above. That is what we shoot for - in ideally, supplemental feeding should not be needed.

The drought really hit hard in the fall. We had a very dry July and August, but got a rebound Goldenrod flow. Other times, nectar was almost non-existent, and in many areas pollen was short, too. This left the bees short on winter honey stores and also short on pollen for early brood rearing. Hopefully you fed 2:1 syrup or honey in the fall and got the stores to where they needed to be. Going into February, brood rearing will begin, and pollen will be needed to feed the larvae. So, it’s good idea to put a small amount of pollen substitute (or natural pollen if you saved some) on top of the top bars near the cluster, just in case they need it. Only put a small square on at one time to avoid drawing in the Small Hive Beetles. And keep after it – once you start feeding pollen, you need to continue until natural pollen is available. Honey consumption will also increase at this time.

Speaking of locating the cluster, I used to do this by putting my ear up to the boxes and knocking to locate the bees. I have since read that this is not a good idea. When it’s cold, the bees enter a state called torpor, which is sort of a “sleep” during which they don’t consume a lot of food. A study was done where a temperature probe was inserted above a winter cluster. The temperatures were running around 55 degrees. When someone knocked on the hive, the temperature would go up to 80 degrees and stay there for several hours. This causes them to consume more food, and will deplete their stores quicker. So I don’t do it anymore.
Remember, the arrival of March doesn’t mean you can let your guard down. It may be warming up, but there’s not much natural food around. You may have planted some early blooming bulbs or Witch Hazel, and there will be some tree pollen, but nectar will be scarce. Once temps get into the 50s, you can start feeding 1:1 syrup with an essential oil supplement like Pro Health or Honey Bee Healthy added. This will help get their guts back in shape after a long winter and help to clear out the nosema spores. Stay on top of the feeding – it’s truly heartbreaking to lose a colony to starvation in March.

Before you know it, we’ll be talking about swarm control – come on Spring!

-Ed Szymanski

Upcoming RIBA Events – Zoom Links sent by email/Facebook

- **March 14, 7:00 PM**: Virtual Meeting via Zoom – Erin Forbes – Swarm Management
- **April, 7:00 PM**: Virtual Meeting via Zoom – Cindy Holt – Native Bees of RI; Sara Michaud – Brood Evaluation; Ed Szymanski – The Importance of Monitoring and Controlling Varroa Mites
- **May 9 links sent, 7:00 PM**: Virtual Meeting via Zoom – Rachael Bonoan – Why Do Bees Like Dirty Water?
- **June 10, 7:00 PM (NOTE Thursday night)**: Virtual Meeting via Zoom – Sam Ramsey - Varroa Management: How Mites Should Be Treated

Shared Events – Zoom links will be shared

- **March 1, 7:30 PM**: Virtual Meeting via Zoom – Steve Repasky – Spring Management
- **April 5, 7:30 PM**: Virtual Meeting via Zoom – Lewis Cauble – The Importance of a Robust Mite Monitoring Program
- **May 3, 7:00 PM**: Virtual Meeting via Zoom – Randy Oliver – Topic TBA
- **June 7, 7:30 PM**: Virtual Meeting via Zoom – Q and A Panel / Bob Hickey – Catching and Marking Queens

World Bee Day – May 20

NCBA special event, 7:00 PM with Mike Palmer and more
Letter from the President, Feb. 2021

I still remember one of the first RIBA meetings I ever attended where someone addressed the audience and said “I’ve only been keeping bees for 20 years, so I still consider myself a beginner.” At the time I thought he was just being overly modest, but with every passing year I’m reminded of how large the gulf is between what (I think) I know and what is still left to learn. One of our primary focuses in RIBA is the ongoing education of beekeepers of all experience levels. Some of you reading this may be enrolled in our beginner’s bee school currently. This is the foundation for what will hopefully be an ongoing education that builds year after year, season after season, hive after hive. We’re continually engaged in both adding to and refining our offerings. Winter is a great time to curl up with a book from the RIBA collection at the Greenville Public Library, review some past presentations on our dedicated YouTube channel, hash out your plans for spring on our FaceBook page, or join us for one of our upcoming monthly Zoom meetings.

Speaking of meetings, our program director Ed Szymanski has a top shelf slate of speakers lined up for the first half of 2021. Our calendar features Master Beekeepers, authors, scientists, and professional beekeepers. In June, our most eagerly requested speaker, Dr Sam Ramsey, will finally make his RIBA debut. Trust me, you won’t want to miss that one. One day we WILL be able to safely meet in person again, but until then I’m going to enjoy the opportunity to hear from some of the best of the best from the comfort of my couch. Lots of organizations are sharing invitations to their meetings now, and recordings are often available after the fact, so this really represents a great opportunity to bulk up your bee knowledge at a time when we’re usually cooped up inside (this year more than ever!). We’ll be offering some beginners Q & A sessions at some point when bee school has ended as well, so keep your eyes peeled for that.

I’ve been digging into RIBA’s 100+ year history over the past year and a few things really stand out. First, RIBA has always been a group that is willing to think outside the box. The history is rich, but it doesn’t have to constrain our way of thinking, or how we operate. It’s often said that the bees are the best teachers; you can read a million pages of bee literature but they’ll still frustrate you by doing something unexpected. Beekeepers need to remain flexible if they’re to succeed, and I think RIBA today is honoring that spirit of innovation. The second point I want to make is that RIBA is not some monolithic entity that can exist apart from the members that comprise it. The lifeblood of an organization like this is its membership, so be a part of it. Let us know what is working for you or what you’d like to see us doing in the future. Get involved in any small way, even if it’s just chatting on the phone with another member in your town. I think it will make you a better beekeeper, and I know you’ll have a lot more fun on the journey.

-Scott Langlais, President
RIBA Bee Yard Update

The RIBA yard is hunkered down for now after a typical not so typical season. Rather than go into great details, I will just note that we lost one hive, struggled with getting to the hives due to this topsy turvy new covid world and of course, struggled with the mites. Despite that, we were still able to complete the monthly BIP sampling and maintain the 4-colony requirement to participate. Please feel free to peruse the PDF and after the newsletter is out, I will put up a post to answer any questions you may have.

For those of you who are new to the club, the RIBA apiary is a small apiary tucked away on Red Planet Farm in Johnston. What started out as a small club sponsored queen rearing operation is now being used as a model of a small self-sustaining apiary that we feel is a goal that any backyard hobbyist beekeeper can attain within a few seasons. While beekeeping may pose a challenge as a source of income, you can, with some work, have this sometimes rather expensive hobby pay for itself with bees and hive products. We may do a small round of queen rearing this spring, in honor of Ed Lafferty’s original vision of this yard being a means to supply the club with good locally bred queen stock. We will continue participating in the Sentinel Apiary program which is the first and only participating apiary in the state. Current president Scott Langlais, who used to operate the yard, felt that this was an important component of the club apiary. The goal of the Sentinel Apiary Program is to become an early warning system to alert beekeepers of problems due to increases in Varroa/Nosema (from the Sentinel Apiary website). Participation in the program includes a detailed inspection where we count frames of bees, assess brood pattern and then collect samples of bees to be sent to the Bee Informed Partnership lab for Varroa mite and Nosema spore counts. We readied the hives at the apiary for winter starting in July with consistent mite tests and treatments as needed. This was then followed up with more mite testing to ensure the application worked. Syrup feeding began in early October with about 6 gallons (60 pounds of weight) added to each colony to top off what they already had. In December, we added some dry emergency sugar and will now wait for a warm day to return this February and do a wellness check.

Part of participation in the Sentinel Apiary program is a hive scale that records weight, temperature and humidity which can be checked online. Lily Bogosian has joined the yard and is currently working on understanding the data and working out glitches so that in the very near future, this valuable data can be shared with the club.

(Sentinel Apiary Report included as a separate attachment) -Cindy Holt
2020 Rhode Island Honey Prices

“What are you all charging for a pound of honey?” This question comes up in our online discussions every year. The 2020 RIBA Honey Survey was our way to try to provide a baseline price range for the most popular sizes of honey containers. Since most of our members do not sell honey as their primary source of income, pricing can be flexible. Indeed, some reported they don’t charge for their honey at all, offering it exclusively as a gift to family and friends. Where you sell your honey likely plays a big part in how you price your harvest as well; a high-end specialty food shop in Barrington will very likely charge more than a roadside farmstand in Coventry. Producing a honey crop is hard work and you deserve a fair price for your product. Understanding what your local community currently charges for a similar product can help you to be competitive, as well as preventing you from leaving money on the table, or undercutting the work of your neighboring beekeepers.

Strictly speaking, “competition” is not likely to be a major concern for most RIBA members. With good demand and generally low inventory, it’s not much of a challenge to sell honey in the volumes we are producing. As a matter of personal pride and ongoing public confidence it is worth remembering that two 1-lb jars of honey are not necessarily created equal. I have often lamented seeing poorly filled jars, improperly labelled, and generally sloppy looking on store shelves. Compare that to a carefully filled Muth bottle, exquisitely clean, sealed with wax and topped off with a ribbon and well designed label. Both may be “a pound of honey” but I know which one I think deserves to receive a premium price.

2020 saw a strong interest in local honey. Known as a natural and health-supporting substance, honey seemed to be on everyone’s shopping list in the age of COVID. Drought conditions over the summer meant reduced nectar available to our bees, and anecdotally, it was not a great honey season. With increased demand and a reduced supply, many chose to raise their prices in response. Compared to the price ranges reported for the Northeast in the latest issue of American Bee Journal (Jan 2021, p. 22), Rhode Islanders are meeting or exceeding the highest listed prices, across the board. Keep in mind, “the Northeast” is a large and varied market, including the New England states, New York, Pennsylvania, etc. 16oz jars are the most commonly offered format by sellers, with 8oz jars also giving a strong showing. Surprisingly, more respondents to this survey are offering cut comb compared to squeeze bears. Few are selling Ross Rounds; maybe this lack of competition helps explain the high prices those sellers are earning.

73 respondents answered our survey questions, this number represents a little more than 10% of our total membership for 2020. In order to provide a clearer picture of RI’s honey prices specifically, we asked our members from other states to abstain from participating. The replies are summarized below.
Colony numbers are in line with what we’d expect, with 83.6% of respondents running six or less colonies. RIBA is primarily a group of backyard beekeepers and good forage in our small state is increasingly in demand. Our yearly bee school means a relatively large influx of new beekeepers annually and they of course tend to have fewer hives. Only one respondent reported running 26-35 colonies for honey in 2020.

52.1% harvested less than 100lbs of spring honey. 19.2% harvested no spring honey. On the high end, 2 respondents reported harvesting 500-750lbs of spring honey (both in Providence County, running 16-25 colonies).
49.3% harvested less than 100lbs of fall honey. 27.4% harvested no fall honey. On the high side, 2 respondents reported harvesting between 401-500lbs of fall honey. It’s worth noting that the fact that honey was extracted in the fall doesn’t necessarily mean it is the product of fall-blooming plants. This survey wasn’t undertaken in a “scientific” way, so some assumptions are inevitable in interpreting the responses.
What is your RETAIL (1-on-1 sales, farm stand, etc) price per jar for the following:

**8oz Retail Jars:** most are selling for $8 or $10. This is the second most popular size being sold, with 40 out of 73 selling this size. Reported range in ABJ is $4.00 - 8.50.

**8oz Wholesale Jars:** most are selling for less than $7. Nobody is selling for more than $8. Only 11 of 73 sell this size.

What is your RETAIL (1-on-1 sales, farm stand, etc) price per jar for the following:

**12 oz Plastic Bear**
12oz Squeeze Bear Retail: $12 is the most common asking price. 10 of 73 sell this size. ($5 - $12 ABJ)
What is your RETAIL (1-on-1 sales, farm stand, etc) price per jar for the following:

![Bar chart showing 16oz Retail Jars prices](chart)

**16oz Retail Jars**: Quite a spread of prices on this size, from $10 to more than $16. $12 to $15 most commonly, with $15 being the most popular answer (16 responses). This is the single most popular size being offered: 62 of 73 sell this. ($6-$14 ABJ)

**16oz Wholesale Jars**: Less than $10 to $13. Most selling for $10 or less. 21/73 sell this. ($5-12 ABJ)

What is your RETAIL (1-on-1 sales, farm stand, etc) price per jar for the following:

![Bar chart showing 16oz Cut Comb prices](chart)

**16oz Cut Comb**: Reflecting the increased difficulty in producing and packaging, cut comb is demanding a premium price: $20 and up generally. Only 12 are selling. ($8-16 ABJ, but their listing is for 12oz Comb)
8oz Ross Round: $14-$20. An even more niche product than cut comb, only 6 are selling the plastic Ross Rounds. Prices in RI are substantially higher than being reported for the rest of the Northeast. ($7.50-9.50 ABJ)

Do you sell honey in other formats besides those above? (check all that apply)

73 responses

As far as other formats to sell, the most popular are 2lb jars, hex jars, and Muth jars. Combined with the standard jar sizes this represents a good variety of options for consumers. 38/73 are not selling any alternative formats.
As far as the PRIMARY way members are selling honey, the overwhelming response was 1-on-1 sales (64.4%). This makes sense considering the small volume most respondents are dealing with. Wholesale to retail shop/grocery/farm was the second most popular method at 15.1%. Three respondents said they don’t sell the honey they harvest.

Besides the primary way I sell honey, I also sell through (check all that apply):

- Private sales (1-on-1) 44 (60.3%)
- Farm stand (home) 12 (16.4%)
- Farmers’ market/fairs -3 (4.1%)
- Online -10 (13.7%)
- Word of mouth -1 (1.4%)
- Holiday Fairs but not this year -1 (1.4%)
- n/a -1 (1.4%)
- no other, just give to family -1 (1.4%)
- I dont sell it -1 (1.4%)
- Facebook -1 (1.4%)
- As above -1 (1.4%)

Besides the primary way honey is sold, home farm stands, farmers markets, and online sales were popular.

Hopefully this information will prove useful for those who may be extracting their first honey harvests this year and wondering how they should price their products. It may also give an idea for ways that you could diversify your offerings into underrepresented areas. Thanks to all who responded to the survey. Here’s hoping for a bountiful 2021 season.

-Scott Langlais