

# The Bee's Knees

By ANDI DIEHN

Illustration by J. MORIA STEPHENS

“Can you smell that?” asks Phil Greene as he approaches his five Langstroth hives that overlook his log cabin in Plainfield, N.H. The air around the hives is slightly touched with the sweet scent of honey. “Goldenrod is a very strong honey. You can tell when it’s goldenrod.”

A mix of Italian and Carniolan bees buzz around the five stacked white hives and mostly ignore the humans in their midst. They all have a job to do; some guard the entrance, others leave the hive to collect pollen, some

feed the larvae. Honey bees might zoom around your head a bit if you get right in their beeline — between their hive and the nectar — but they’re generally too busy to go out of their way to sting.

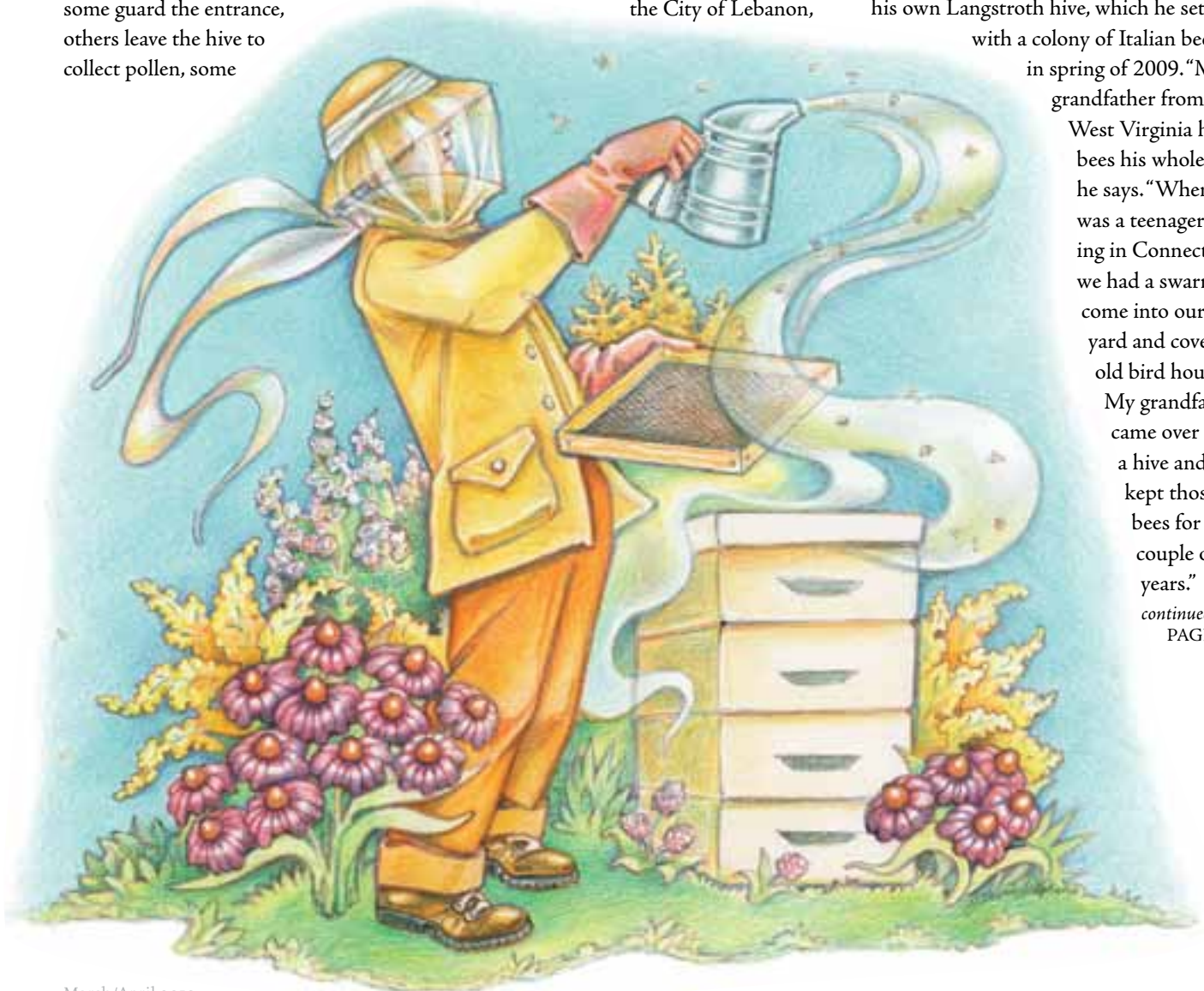
Greene isn’t new to the hobby of beekeeping, but he would never call himself an expert. “I know someone who’s been doing this for 20 years and he’s still learning new things every day,” he says. Greene — a paramedic and firefighter for the City of Lebanon,

N.H. — has been keeping five to seven hives for the past 10 years. As a teenager he caught an interest in beekeeping from one of his high school teachers and developed his own hobby when he moved back to the Upper Valley from New Jersey. Now he shares his passion with his 7-year-old son, Luke.

Over in Enfield, N.H., Jamie Buffington is a newcomer to the practice of keeping bees. He’s learning his way around his own Langstroth hive, which he set up

with a colony of Italian bees in spring of 2009. “My grandfather from West Virginia had bees his whole life,” he says. “When I was a teenager living in Connecticut we had a swarm come into our yard and cover an old bird house. My grandfather came over with a hive and we kept those bees for a couple of years.”

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The beekeeping bug never left Buffington, who works in aviation insurance, and when he and his wife, Shara, moved to the Upper Valley in 2005 he finally had the space to get his own hive. His three young children are almost as fascinated by the bees as Buffington is.

The recent attention to self-sustainability has sparked a new generation of back-to-the-land hobbyists over the past decade. Backyard beekeeping could become the next hobby of choice for those with urges toward environmental responsibility. It's a logical step from vegetable gardens and chickens.

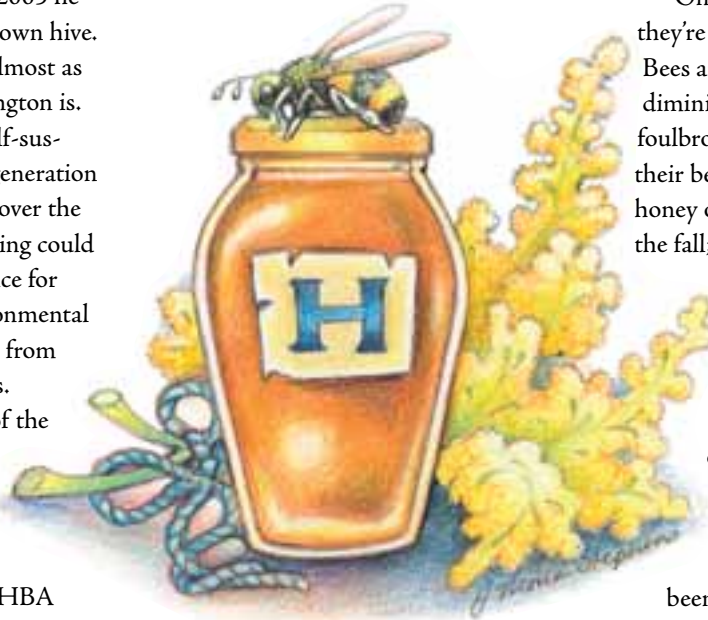
Wendy Booth, treasurer of the New Hampshire Beekeepers Association (NHBA), has seen membership and workshop attendance bloom over the last few years. "The NHBA has existed for at least 30 years, probably a lot longer than that," she says. "This year we nearly doubled our membership numbers. Prior to the last three years we might have 6 to 10 people attend a class; now 50 to 60 people fill the room." The NHBA is an umbrella group for local beekeeping clubs, such as Kearsarge Beekeepers and Merrimack Beekeepers Association, and offers education and support for beekeepers new and expert.

While most hobbyist beekeepers keep just a few hives in their backyards, Booth would love to see collections grow large enough so local growers could hire local beekeepers to pollinate their crops instead of shipping in commercial hives from places like Florida. It's another way to keep the local economy local.

Here's what you'll first see when you get into a hive: smoke. "Smoke masks the pheromones," explains Buffington as he puffs leaf smoke into the top and the front door of his hive. He's using his grandfather's 30-year-old smoker. "It also makes them gorge on honey so they can recreate the hive if there's a fire in the woods." This means

the bees aren't as likely to alert each other to the danger poking around in their hive.

The top level of a Langstroth hive — developed in Pennsylvania in 1851 by



Lorenzo Langstroth — is called the shallow honey super; that's where bees keep their extra honey, the stuff beekeepers can harvest for their own. Eight or ten frames — depending on the size — slide into the super and the bees fill the comb with honey and then cap it off with wax. The next level down is the deep food chamber, where the bees store the honey that will keep them alive over the winter.



Next stop is the brood chamber, which acts as the nursery for thousands of baby bees.

Beekeepers usually check on the health of their hives every couple of

weeks, though going longer between internal visits isn't unusual. "It can be as work intensive as you want it to be," says Buffington.

One thing beekeepers look for when they're in the hive is signs of disease. Bees are susceptible to a number of diminishing conditions like mites and foulbrood. Beekeepers can medicate their bees before they start producing honey or after harvesting the honey in the fall; there are also several natural techniques, like using a screened bottom board that prevents mites from crawling back into the hive.

Greene checks his hives every few weeks. "It's nice if you can find the queen. But you don't want to squash her." He grimaces. "Not that that hasn't been done before."

When it's time to harvest the honey, beekeepers scrape off the wax with a hot knife and place the frame in an extractor which works like a centrifuge to separate the honey from the cells. Colonies generally don't produce much honey the first year — though Buffington was able to harvest 55 pounds last fall — but established hives can usually offer 60 to 100 pounds of surplus honey, depending on the weather. Besides honey and wax, bees also make propolis, a sticky substance used in all kinds of products from medicine to varnish.

If you're thinking about starting your own beehive, plan early. New hives are set up in the spring, but by January aviaries across the state are already taking orders and by May most places are sold out. The most helpful book on beekeeping? Greene and Buffington agree: *Beekeeping for Dummies*.

What else can a colony of bees provide beside honey, wax, pollination and propolis? Entertainment. Greene says, "I could pull up a chair and watch them for hours."

For more information on beekeeping, go to [www.nhbeekeepers.org](http://www.nhbeekeepers.org) UVL