

What's The BUZZ?

Local beekeepers say their passion goes beyond the sweet benefits of taking care of their own hives. "I feel like I'm doing something to help the earth," says one beekeeper.

BY LISA CAVANAUGH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARCY FORD



On a hot and humid July morning, a handful of dedicated bee lovers wearing long sleeves and protective netted hoods check on a group of hives tucked on the hillside above Cape Cod Organic Farm in Barnstable. The enthusiastic apiarists are part of Barnstable County Beekeepers Association (BCBA), a group of approximately 300 to 400 local beekeepers who have been meeting for more than 40 years to share knowledge and advice on their shared passion: honeybees.

This morning, Claire Desilets, corresponding secretary and decades-long member of BCBA, guides volunteers as they inspect their breeding hives, looking for the queens. Three dark green wooden boxes sit on a picnic bench outside of a storage building, while a steady stream of worker bees flit in and out of small openings at their bases. The team searches each honey-combed frame for queens and with more than 15,000 bees in a single box, it seems an impossibly hard task. But Desilets has been looking at bees for more than 30 years, and she finds them relatively quickly. "There she is," says Desilets, pointing gently toward one of hundreds of bees crawling and buzzing



Caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here
here caption info here caption info here caption info here.



Caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here
caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here.

over the sticky frame. The queen has a long, slightly engorged rear end that is distinctly orange-brown. The workers, some with gobs of yellow pollen weighing them down, move quickly around and over her.

Desilets explains that they are trying to breed queens from local bee populations.

"In 2010, we got a specialty crop grant to try and figure out the best way to raise hardy northern queens," she says, "instead of always having to get queens from southern states." Desilets takes strong over-wintered hives that have good genetics and grafts from existing queen's larvae. The larvae are placed in tiny wooden cages outfitted with sugar-feeding tubes, where they can hatch into virgin queens. "After they go on mating flights and we see who's a good egg layer, then we can spread our northern bee genes here on Cape Cod."

A former pharmacist who, as a teenager, learned beekeeping at a local 4-H club, Desilets has 20 hives of her own at home, down from an all-time high of 50 hives when she and her husband were beekeeping together. "I lost my husband to cancer four years ago," she says, "so it's a blessing to do this. I'm very busy with the club and my own apiary, raising queens and so forth. It keeps me going."

Honeybees are not native to North America, but ever since they were brought here by colonists in the 17th

century, they have joined the more than 4,000 native species of bees on the continent as important pollinators. In fact, honeybees are responsible for billions of dollars in agricultural productivity in the United States alone. "Ninety percent of plants rely on pollination," says Val Dolcini, president and CEO of the Pollinator Partnership, a Washington, D.C., based nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the health of pollinators through conservation, education and research. "So pollinators in general—and that includes birds, bats, butterflies, beetles, in addition to bees—are critically important to our Western diet and the food security of our nation."

Many beekeepers understand this and their passion goes beyond sweet benefits from their own hives. "Originally it was just about the honey," says Kim Concra, who sought out alternatives to sugar when her twin daughters were diagnosed with Crohn's disease in their teens. "But it's so much better than I imagined. I feel like I'm doing something to help the earth." Concra, who is the nutrition and food safety specialist at Cape Cod Cooperative Extension, is a relatively new member of BCBA but her love of honeybees harkens back to memories of her grandfather's upstate New York farm. "He was a beekeeper and I remember my brother and I getting honeycombs in old mayonnaise jars from his hives."



Caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here
caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here caption info here.

Now she is active in much of BCBA's activities, having attended the group's "bee school" a couple of years ago and participating in the annual "Beekeepers Ball" each September. The event offers food made from local honey, educational talks and awareness of bees and beekeeping. This year, it's on Sept. 15 at Cape Cod Beer. "September is national honey month, so it's a perfect time to let people know the business of bees is good for all of us."

The first hive that Concra and her husband had at their Brewster home yielded them 40 pounds of honey that initial year. "I bought beautiful jars and gave honey as gifts."

But just like many local beekeepers, Concra's colony experienced trouble and didn't produce any honey the next two years. "We are still learning, and the advantage of being part of BCBA is getting advice from other beekeepers."

Another novice beekeeper on Cape Cod who faced challenges is Liz Fallon of Hyannis Port. "I have my beehive at my family's home, right in my garden. I just started last year and unfortunately I lost my hive over the winter." A few years ago, Fallon says she became aware of the bee crisis happening all over the world. Her family surprised her with a hive for Christmas and she began taking beekeeping courses. "I was over-

whelmed by the experienced beekeepers' enthusiasm for tending to their hives and even referring to themselves as "Beeks—bee geeks. Little did I know that I would grow into a beek myself!"

Fallon got a new hive and everything is going well this season. She believes that her former colony collapsed because of Varroa mites, which can overtake a hive and spread infectious diseases. "We encourage beekeepers to keep track of the Varroa count, says Desilets. "You really can't have anything more than three Varroa per 100 bees, or your bees won't make it." To assist in combating the mite, BCBA gives members

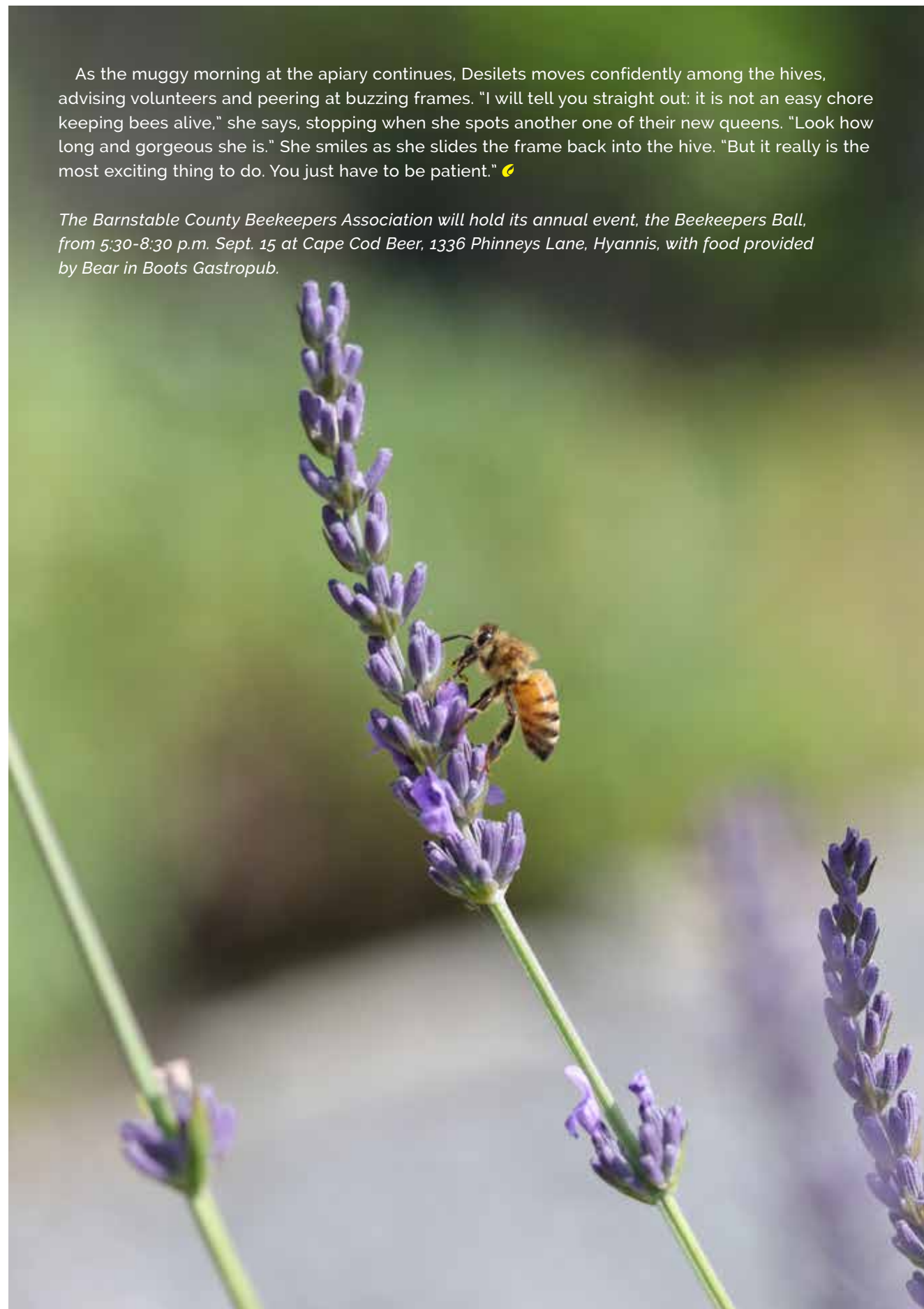
suggestions on how to deal with the problem and has three natural organic treatments available.

"Varroa mites are just one of the issues impacting honey bees in North America, says Dolcini from the Pollinator Partnership. "Pests, parasites, loss of habitat, pesticides. All of these are stressors to bee populations." Desilets agrees that it is a combination of issues that threaten bee health. "I always urge people not to spray pesticides on the bloom itself, and wait until dusk when the bees are back in their hives. It's critical for people to know, especially since tick and mosquito spraying has risen in popularity."



As the muggy morning at the apiary continues, Desilets moves confidently among the hives, advising volunteers and peering at buzzing frames. "I will tell you straight out: it is not an easy chore keeping bees alive," she says, stopping when she spots another one of their new queens. "Look how long and gorgeous she is." She smiles as she slides the frame back into the hive. "But it really is the most exciting thing to do. You just have to be patient." 🐝

The Barnstable County Beekeepers Association will hold its annual event, the Beekeepers Ball, from 5:30-8:30 p.m. Sept. 15 at Cape Cod Beer, 1336 Phinneys Lane, Hyannis, with food provided by Bear in Boots Gastropub.



Bee Love

There are many ways you can help the bees on Cape Cod, both honeybees and wild species, such as planting for pollinators or buying locally grown honey.

The BCBA, the Pollinator Partnership and Barnstable County Cape Cod Cooperative Extension all have online suggestions of what to plant in your yard and garden, such as nectar and pollen-packed plants to attract pollinators.

barnstablebeekeepers.org/resources/index.html

pollinator.org/guides

capecodextension.org/aghort/resources/

The Barnstable County Beekeeper Association has a booth each summer at the Barnstable County Fair where members sell items from their hives, such as honey, beeswax candles and soap.

In addition, you can find local honey products at most Cape Cod area farmers markets

and some local stores, such as Organic Market in Dennis, Mashpee and Chatham, Orleans Whole Foods and Barnstable Market.

Beekeepers also stress that everyone should be careful when using pesticides. Instead, many urge, opt for organic solutions for yard pests. If toxins are used, avoid times when bees are foraging and always keep poison sprays away from blossoms.