

Dronings from a Queen Bee

By Charlotte Hubbard

Her brother was supposed to be the one.

Winter of '09, when friend Cris helped me sort through my late husband's bee equipment, I shared my vast knowledge of beekeeping (from a mere single season of stings and sweetness).

Cris, semi-fascinated with bees, felt her teenage son would be fully fascinated. She wanted to bring him over come spring, to see how package bees were installed and what beekeeping was all about. Cris emphasized though that it would just be her son. Daughter Taylor was dreadfully scared of bees.

When my bee arrived that spring, Cris brought her son to help, and 11-year-old Taylor tagged along. I was delighted, but Taylor squished my enthusiasm by proclaiming she wanted NOTHING to do with bees, she just came to video the installations. Through the kitchen window.

I talked Taylor into at least putting on a suit and taping outdoors. It is tough to get good video through a window 50 feet from the apiary, especially my windows. I hadn't yet spring-cleaned them, for the fourth year in a row.

After videotaping the first package installation, Taylor did creep a bit closer, to the outside edge of the apiary.

By the third package, she'd slipped within spitting (or stinging?) distance.

At the fifth package she was positioning the queen cage between two frames, and she practically installed the sixth package herself.

And her older brother, the one who we all thought would be interested in beekeeping? Well, he did provide the muscle—carrying the “rack o' bees,” seven packages in all, from the garage to the apiary. But then, he got distracted by making fire, and strayed off to herd a turtle across the yard with the smoker. If you were to dissect a 14-year-old boy, I swear you'd find two 7-year-olds inside.

It was Taylor who helped me check the hives in a week, and helped me install two more packages later that month. Her interest in bees seemed genuine, but I figured it was only a matter of months before the fascination with bees changed to a fascination with boys.



Queen Bee Cris, Beekeeper Taylor, and Alex the Young Drone.

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Surprisingly and wonderfully though, it continued. Like other fashionable preteens, Taylor sported crazy socks and funky earrings, but funky bee earrings. Unlike other fashionable preteens, she willingly wore an unfashionable bee suit to hang out in the apiary. She even took a few stings through those crazy socks.

It is a challenge to work bees with a non-beekeeper. They need to be able to take direction, and be attentive and calm in the face of tens of thousands of stinging insects ... in your face.

Able to take direction? Attentive? Calm? Not words typically used to describe an 11-year-old. Taylor, wonderfully though, was all of that. Unfortunately she was also a hive-tool-thin 11-year-old. Hard to lift a hive body when it weighs more than you.

In the past year though, to demonstrate her willingness to become a better beekeeper, Taylor's grown several inches. (I have also, although my inches are horizontal.)

Last winter, I participated in Taylor's middle school's science fair night. People swarmed to our "All About Honeybees" classroom, with its free honey samples on graham crackers, until the Alligator / Other Reptiles Guy showed up and the crowd snaked over to his classroom.

Taylor was disappointed to lose the masses to baby alligators with their mouths tied shut, but her (now) 16-year-old brother, who was there to serve samples, was delighted and devouring graham crackers drenched in honey. If you were to dissect a 16-year-old boy you'd still get two 7-year-olds, accompanied by a 2-year-old.

Man-with-Boa-around-Bicep's classroom, and ours, were quickly deserted when the local hovercraft man-

ufacturer made a late grand entrance in yes, a hovercraft. Next year I'm thinking of taking live bees. While they don't make nearly as much noise as a hovercraft, when they fly down the halls they'll get a lot more attention.

This summer, 13-year-old Taylor has continued to "bee" with me. Her knowledge of the winged darlings is growing even faster than she is, along with her enthusiasm for them. How many other teenagers, drenched in sweat and stinging insects, will you find singing happily in a hot apiary? Even in the recent oven-like temperatures, working with her gives me goosebumps. Thank goodness there are kids like Taylor, the future of beekeeping.

But, deep inside that billowing beesuit, she is still a kid. When she leaves the apiary she immediately checks her cellphone and texts dozens of her dearest friends. I'm over 30, I don't get that.

Her messages though are things like "At work today I licked my fingers a lot," and "Keeping bees is the best summer job ever!"

That part I get. 🍯



Taylor inspecting capping progress.