

Dronings from a Queen Bee

Sweet Dreams

By Charlotte Hubbard

If it wasn't for the forthcoming joys of excessive Christmas fudge, I would be quite despondent. You see, I've put my bees to bed for the winter. This necessary step soooo depresses me.

I'm putting my bees to bed because winter is coming. Winter, with its 10-degree above zero nights of howling, electrical-line-snapping winds, followed by mornings of chipping ice off my car windshield? That I can handle. What depresses me is not seeing my ba-bees for several months.

Chances are, if you subscribe to this newsletter, you also suffer from incurable "bee disease." You've watched insects go in and out of a painted pine box for seemingly only five minutes, and then wondered where two hours of your life just went.

This year, fall came slowly in Michigan. In October, as I pattered about the apiary putting the bees to bed, I had a lot of time to reflect on why this essential activity so saddens me.

First, I will miss the visual aspects of my bees. I love looking out the kitchen window at my apiary, especially in mid-summer when hives are four or even five boxes high, an assortment of uncoordinated tropical colors that rival a package of M&Ms, with non-stop take-offs, landings and an occasional swarm to keep me humble.

Winterization means shortening those hives to two deep boxes. Over a couple of transitory weeks the bees go from a colorful tower to a squatty two-story. Doesn't that hurt their self-esteem?

I add insult to injury by covering those vibrant colors with tar paper. As if those black, foreboding wraps weren't disheartening enough, I then add windbreaks. By "windbreaks" I mean an old door, a couple bales of straw, overturned lawn chairs held down by concrete blocks—the sorts of things that make neighborhood associations quickly write new restrictions. All the bee yard is missing is a rusty '81 Chevy on blocks to also be a junk yard.

A second reason I get so depressed about putting my bees to bed is that I know I will likely never see them again. I'm not talking about those bees who naturally succumb to old age in the months ahead; I'm talking about a dismal overwintering success rate that makes me one of Kelley's best package bee customers every spring. If the term "beekeeper" means not only someone who keeps bees but also keeps them alive, I'm not



Some beautiful bee hives in summer Kentucky. Photo courtesy of Pat McGrath.

a beekeeper. I'm just a girl who loves her bees, often to death.

I've tried to improve my overwintering success. Each year I research, study, talk to local beekeepers and try different things. And each spring I clean up too many dead-outs and then install new bees on some beautifully drawn comb.

One year I decided to figure out what would work best in my apiary. With great scientific planning I experimented with groups of four hives in three different locations about the yard. In one group, for example, two hives had solid bottom boards and two had screens; two had multiple vent holes next to two with just Popsicle stick venting, etc.

I had a 50% loss that year: one of each hive type died in each location. The results couldn't have been more inconclusive if I'd engineered it that way. But, even though the results told me nothing, I use the Popsicle ventilation method on every hive now, mainly so I can eat a lot of Popsicles each fall.

In 2010 I had a bit more success keeping hives alive overwinter. I attribute it to using the sugar-on-top-of-newspaper (Mountain Camp) method. This year I'm experimenting with it more and look forward to the results. Come spring I hope to be able to answer if bees with the sports pages fare better than the classified ads.

A third reason I hate putting my bees to bed is because when I can't see them, I worry about them. As you can surmise from the previous paragraphs, there's good reason for me to worry, doggone it.

While my bees are clustered out of sight, they're definitely not out of mind. I wonder if they're healthy, and if they're mentally OK. My siblings can greatly annoy me and we're not in a tight little ball for weeks on end, with each other's feet in our faces, on our backs, under our wings, atop our heads.

I also worry that the bees will get bored reading the sugar-laden newspaper over and over again. But, if I'm being honest, I have an even bigger dread: that my bees are cuddled in a ball, laughing about the time they chased me indoors, and plotting new, creative ways to sting me.

The only thing I dread more than that is the possibility of not seeing them again... 🍯



A beautiful winter day, but less than beautiful hives.