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The Buzz about Bees by Claire Moody

When you think about honey bees is your first thought “sting” or “honey”? Well, if its “sting” you should know a few things. First, most stings are from yellow jackets or hornets. Honey bees get the blame but they are so, so, so busy collecting pollen and nectar they really don’t care about us at all! A colony is made up of about 50,000 bees: one queen, 15% drones which are the male honey bees, and workers – all female. Drones don’t have a stinger. Workers sting only to protect the colony and can only sting once. They die when they sting. The queen can sting multiple times but she reserves that for stinging other queens. More about that in another article...

If your first thought was honey, do you know how the bees make honey? It starts with foraging bees collecting nectar. They can fly up to five miles but usually keep it to two miles. Imagine how hard the bees of Tillamook have it flying against our strong winds! I suspect they live a shorter life because of the winds they have to fight. Normally a honey bee lives about forty days in summer. Her effort contributes to 1/12th of a teaspoon of honey in her lifetime.

Bees hold the nectar they collect in their “honey stomach” which adds enzymes to the nectar that change its chemical composition and ph. When they get back to the hive, the bees pass the nectar from one bee to another, each time adding enzymes before they deposit it in a cell. Then comes the work of evaporating the water in the honey. When there is only about 18% water those hard female workers cover it with a layer of wax. It will now last forever. They found honey in King Tut’s tomb from 3,325 years ago - still good, not fermented. Honey’s color and flavor is determined by the flowers it’s made from.

Keeping bees is definitely challenging but also very, very rewarding. It starts with understanding honey bee biology and behaviors. The first problem is forage. It takes two million trips to flowers to collect enough nectar to make one pound of honey! Amazing! Planting bee-friendly trees and shrubs helps because a flowering tree with a fifteen-foot radius has as many blossoms as two acres of flowers. There’s a huge difference between what honey bees will go to and what they love! It always surprises me when I plant things bees are supposed to like but there are no bees on it. What I learned is that honey bees are smart enough to go to flowers that have the highest sugar content or ones that have nutrients that they need. Amazing! Have I said that already?

What do honey bees love? Go to www.tillamookbeekeepers.org and click on “Foraging” to see pictures and growing information for annuals, perennials, herbs, trees and shrubs.

Want to know more? Come to our next Intro to Honey Bees and Beekeeping class, Saturday, January 15th, 1:00 to 3:30 at the Port of Tillamook Bay Officers Mess Hall. The class is free but please register at www.tillamookbeekeepers.org or call Claire at 503-318-9149 or Brad at 719-896-0000.