

Dronings from a Queen Bee

Bee Careful What You Wish For

By Charlotte Hubbard

Over Labor Day weekend I pulled the last of the honey supers and did fall hive checks. In my apiary, “fall hive check” means ensuring the bees are well on their way to having the amount of honey they need to overwinter, looking at their general health, and verifying that their internet is working so they can check beemail.

The hive-checking exercise (and wow, lifting supers and deeps is exercise!) reinforced why you should have more than one hive. Bees rarely perform like the books describe; success comes with studying and trying to understand the differences. It’s helpful if you have a mentor, and you also need to read, get experience and, I’ve found, rub a lucky rabbit’s foot while hopping on one leg and wearing your lucky socks inside out. Seasonally sacrificing a hive tool to the bee gods also seems to help.

My hives’ results are all over the board. At the top end of the curve is a first year hive located under a towering pine. This power hive delightfully yielded its fourth (!!) super, with every cell filled and capped.

On the other end of the curve were two first year hives, located just a few feet from the overachiever. These hives had been on the watch list all summer. When I opened each of them, I found bees in silly hats in the midst of a party, along with a few wax moths and the queen. Guess those two colonies missed the beemail about making enough honey to get through the winter.

Since those two colonies seemed to enjoy leisure activities, I gave them a couple of sheets of newspaper to read. The newspaper had slits in it, and went between them and a strong colony. If this sounds a lot like the newspaper method for combining hives, you’re right.

The “partied all of August” hives seemed happy enough about being combined, once they got past missing their queens, who were smashed. And by “smashed,” well, that’s what I mean.

The hive combos left me with two vacant hives. Reflecting on the many swarm retrieval calls I received in August, I said to myself, “Self, wouldn’t it’d be great to have a swarm now?”

There’s a reason they say “be careful what you wish for.”

Two days later I put the extracted frames back on hives for bee clean up. The bees guarding the brimming power hive hardly paid attention to me. Confused by their lack of concern, I looked at its entrance, full of bees who couldn’t care less about me.

Soon, a few bees made their way out the front door, and then a few more, and then the dam broke. In less than a minute, an amber-brown torrent of insects gushed from the mouth of the hive, swirled about and filled the air with buzzing bodies. I could’ve thrown myself across the hive entrance, er, exit but I swear I



Inside my first year hives.

would've just been pushed aside in the unstoppable surge of insects. I was in the middle of a swarm and there was nothing I could do but watch in awe at the thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of insects pouring out. It was very cool, but doggone it! While I'd wanted a swarm, I didn't want it from one of my hives!

The swarm swirled past dozens of low-hanging branches to settle on, of course, practically the top of the tree.

I glared at them. They didn't care.

I shouted that it was September! I explained that, according to the old adage, a swarm in September is worth ... nothing! What were they thinking?! (Besides making a fool out of this beekeeper who thought they were managing their bees.)

I've heard of various ways to get a swarm from atop a tree. One involves shooting an arrow with an attached string over a nearby bough. You then hook a queen-scented frame to the other end of the string, and raise it near the bees. According to the books, again unread by bees, the bees will probably move to that frame, so you can later lower them into a hive where they'll live happily ever after.

I ruled out that option as it would take waaaaay too long. I'm in my early 50s, and still can't sink a paper wad into a trash can three feet away. I'm pretty sure that in the half century it'd take me to learn to use a bow and arrow, the swarm will have moved elsewhere.

Besides, I don't believe in "happily ever after." If I did, my best hive wouldn't have swarmed as I stood next to it in September.

I glared again at the swarm. Again, they didn't care.

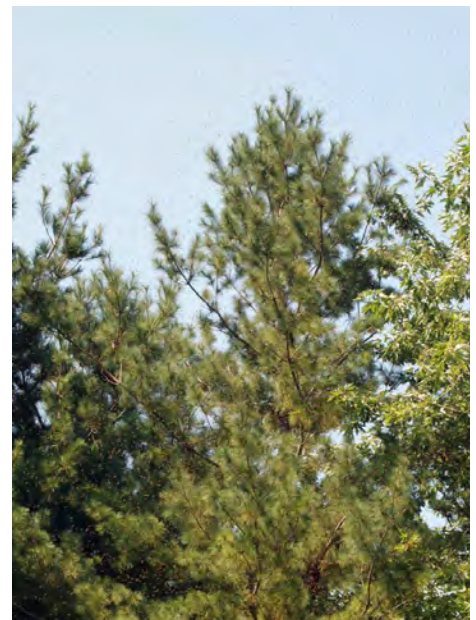
I wondered what other folks do when they have a swarm in their backyard. Oh yeah, they call folks on our bee club's swarm list, like me.

I quickly assembled a hive, sprinkled its drawn comb with lemongrass, and set it out as a lure hive. I wandered back and forth under the tree, pointing to the hive, and mentioning loudly and often what an ideal location that hive was, and how pretty it was. They didn't care.

Needing to think some more, I went indoors and began taking off my protective suit, all the while wishing that my power hive wasn't clustered at the top of a pine tree.

By the time I finished hanging up my suit and checked the give, they were no where to be seen.

I really must be more careful about what I wish for.



And they're off!

Temporarily ended waaaaay up here.



C'mon ladies, was your hive just not pretty enough?

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