

FCBA NEWS

Franklin County Beekeepers Association

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Club Upcoming Scheduled Events

Currently we have no scheduled events, withstanding continued Covid-19 regulations has been a tough deal. Meeting places are hard to find that would allow GROUP gatherings.

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Welcome to 2021 – I can't wait to see how my bees make it through winter. I did my best but one never knows until spring how good that was for the bees.

Just the other day was it was kinda warm 45F, I could see a little activity at each of my hives, but we are not out of the woods yet, more of winter to come.

January for the Beekeeper

When you get the chance, peek in your hives to be sure they have food. It seems there is always a break in the cold temperatures, warm enough to take a peek into the hives. Take note of any dead hives.

Some suggest that any dead hives up till the end of the year usually means disease and/or mite issues. This could cause smaller than normal clusters (inadequate fall brood) not be able to cope with the cold, premature shrinking of the cluster as the bees lifespan was shortened, and a poorly functioning cluster due to sickness.

Hives strong enough to make it to January usually are not affected by disease or mites. Most hives dying from this point forward are usually lost due to starvation. Beekeepers simply fail to feed their light hives as the bees start early season brood rearing. The first half of the winter season may see bees use only 30% of their stored honey or feed. But once brood rearing starts, the bees in the same amount of time will burn through the remaining 70% and be on the verge of starvation in late February.

Don't let them die now, due to something you have the ability to handle.

If you do have winter dead outs, get the hives out of the bee yards. Store them in a shed or unheated garage. Your wooden ware will last many more years if only hives with bees sit outside in the bee yards.

Now is also a good time to put together new hives, get them painted, and get winter tasks completed. Bees bringing in pollen and early spring temperatures will be here soon. That time will fly by.

If you need bees, get them ordered. Don't wait till spring to order your bees. Most providers will be sold out by that time. Many new beekeepers each year wait too long and miss starting beekeeping that year.

Mason Bees?

The suggestion was made to include Mason Bees into our vision. I took the liberty of finding out a little more about these little guys. I thought I'd share some info here.

What Are Mason Bees?

Mason bees are beautiful, gentle native bees that are also excellent pollinators. Before honeybees were brought over from Europe; native bees, like mason bees, did all the pollinating here in North America. Mason bees do not produce honey – they collect pollen, whereas honeybees collect nectar. A mason bee's whole body is hairy and collects pollen, when they land on a flower they splash and pollinate better. Additionally, they're actively looking for pollen, making them 3x better pollinators

than honeybees. Another key difference from honeybees is the mason bee doesn't live together in a hive, instead living solitary. They're a bee that's active early in the season and pollinates throughout the spring.

Mason bees only have a range of about 350 feet; so they benefit you and your close neighbors. They're extremely friendly and can be great for kids who want to stand close to the nest and watch the bees in action. They're *highly unlikely* to sting and if they do it's more like a pinch or mosquito bite.

Mason bees are excellent pollinators, demonstrating 95% pollination success compared to honey bees, which typically pollinate about 5% of the flowers they visit in a day. Also, they are cold hardy and resistant to disease as long as their homes are kept clean, so they are easy to maintain year after year.

Mason Bee Basics

- J Mason bees emerge from cocoons. Mason bees lay eggs inside reeds or tubes and their eggs develop into cocoons before they hatch as bees. They need mortar (clay) to seal the eggs in.
 - o Best to keep a spot in the garden with wet clay exposed to make things easier for your bees.
- J Make it as easy for the bees as possible. They will travel but if they go far away they might not come back. Try to keep them on your property.
- J If set up in the right location with all the right amenities, native bees can

take up residence. A sad reality is that today, there aren't as many native bees around so you may have to purchase some cocoons to re-introduce them to the area.

- J While gentle and fuzzy, even with a home set up, mason bees are not pets, they're wild insects. Releasing cocoons by your house, does not guarantee that they'll take up residence there.
- J Like with honeybees, mites (pollen mites) are a *major* pest of the mason bee and often get on mason bees and inside the houses and tubes. For this reason you'll need to clean off the cocoons before wintering them. (*See cleaning tips under Fall below*)
- J Some tubes will unravel and are a one-time use; however you can buy reusable ones that customers can clean out annually (better if you're committed to doing it more than once).

Requirements for mason bees in the garden

- J ***Moist clay soil*** – the female bees need moist clay to build the cell walls in the nesting chamber. Soil that is too sandy will crumble. You can set out a container of clay powder if your soil is not naturally high in clay.
- J ***Spring flowering plants close to the nest*** – Fruit trees such as apple, cherry, peach, pear, and plum are ideal. Mason bees prefer single flowers to showy hybrids and double-blossoms, which may not provide adequate nutrition.

J ***Other flowering plants*** – Blue, purple, or yellow blossoms that bloom during the lifespan of the adults are most attractive to mason bees.

- o Flower power, seriously. Mason bees need an area dense with flowers. You'll want to have lots of flowers around between flowering trees, bushes and gardens and wildflowers.

Making a Home for Mason Bees

The right location for your bee house is key. Too hot and the bees overheat, too much shade and you'll attract beneficial wasps instead (great for controlling bugs but maybe not ideal for your bee house). A spot facing east that receives morning sun and isn't too hot in the afternoon is ideal.

It's in the reed. When giving mason bees a home, it's very important that you use the right reed or tube for them to lay eggs in. A reed or tube that can be opened up to retrieve the cocoons (what the eggs turn into) is important so they're not trapped inside. Using foreign materials like bamboo or plastic straws is not advised.

- J One-time use reeds can be affordably purchased or for long-term use, tube blocks that can be opened, cleaned and re-used are ideal.
- J Proper care for your bees. Giving your bees a bit of attention at key times can ensure their health. Harvesting cocoons (more on that later) in late fall, separating pests and cleaning the house is necessary for good bee health.

FCBA News

January 2021 - Volume 4 - Issue 1

- J To keep bees around is pretty simple – setting out a home for them in the spring and harvesting the cocoons from that home in the fall are important. Using the proper reeds or blocks makes this easy.
- J Keeping the birds from your bees. Sometimes birds will take an interest in your bee home and eating the residents within it. If this happens, install wire with 1”+ openings to the outside of your bee house with wire 2-3” away from the opening so bees have room to take-off and land.

Mason Bee Care Calendar

Keeping mason bees doesn't have to require a lot of time. In fact you can do it as little as an hours work in an entire year! Seriously, it can be as simple as setting up the bee house in the spring and bringing them inside and harvesting the cocoons in the fall. Here are some season-by-season care tips.

Spring

If your trees are flowering:

- J Remove the container from the shipping package or storage container, and place the box of bees near their new homes outside. If your bee house has an “attic” to place the bees, then you can set the box on the shelf with the lid open, or make a 5/16” hole on the side of the box. You can also use tape to attach the bee box to the bottom of your nesting block, with the lid open. Generally, it takes one to four days above 55° F for the bees to begin emerging. You can purchase a Mason Bee Kit which includes the House and nesting block. There are

also many DIY examples of mason bee homes too!

If you are keeping the bees dormant:

If it is not time for your bees to hatch, you can place the mason bee box in a cool, dark place to keep them dormant, such as a garage that stays between 40°F-50°F or a refrigerator

- J In early spring, set up your bee hotel or house. It's best to place your bee house in an east-facing direction, so the sun warms them up in the morning but they're shaded from afternoon sun and don't overheat.
- J When area flowers are open and daytime temperatures are at least 55°F, release your cocoons on top of or behind nesting holes.
- J Remember mason bees need clay mud for nesting. Make sure the clay doesn't dry out and bees have a water source.
- J Watch as your bees emerge from their cocoons, males are usually the first bees to emerge and the larger females can take an extra couple weeks.

Early Summer - STORING NESTING TUBES AND BLOCKS (July to August)

Adult bees stop foraging by early summer, and so you will stop seeing bee activity in the garden. The cocoons that have been laid inside the nesting boxes will mature over the summer until they are fully developed as adults by the fall. The adults overwinter inside the cocoon.

FCBA News

January 2021 - Volume 4 - Issue 1

- J Collect your nesting reeds or blocks and store in a warm protected location with the capped ends facing up.

Place cleaned cocoons in a container with air holes in a cool, dark environment with 60-70% humidity

Fall - HARVEST COCOONS (October to November)

Cocoons can be removed from the nesting block or tube, being careful not to damage the adult bee inside. Stacked trays can be taken apart, and the cocoons removed using a flat head screwdriver to gently scrape the hole. Cardboard and paper tubes can be carefully sliced open and peeled apart.

- J At the end of the season, mason bee tubes should be collected and the cocoons harvested.
- J Inside the tubes, the bee cocoons can look like they're covered in sawdust (this is just the sheer mass of pollen mites that may be on the cocoons). Pollen mites *don't eat the eggs but they will go after cocoons*.
- J To clean off mites, put in a bath of room temperature water with a drop of bleach. Any cocoons that don't float aren't viable, likely having a hole in the shell, and can be discarded.
 - o Another method for cleaning the cocoons is to "wash" them with sand. Use your hands to lightly mix or stir the cocoons in a bowl containing dry sand. The sand rubbing against the cocoon dislodges mites, mud particles, pollen, and frass (the larva's excrement). Use a screen or strainer to separate the cocoons from the sand.

- J When you're collecting the bee cocoons, that's also best time to clean up the bee tubes (if you have the reusable kind) as well.
 - o Clean with a dash of bleach in water to sterilize the tubes
- J Gently dry your cocoons (so they don't rot) and store in a paper bag or cardboard box. Store harvested cocoons in a fridge and check periodically to make sure it's not humid in their storage box.
- J You can keep their house inside until the early spring.

Common reasons for bees not hatching the following year

- J Housing absorbed too much moisture (not protected from rain)
- J The nest box was moved too early (larvae can become separated from their food supply in the nest chamber)
- J Winter storage temperatures below 10 F
- J Severe pollen mite infestation
- J Overheating in the summer

Note from Member

“I am still running into problems after 3 years of beekeeping. Fortunately, I am able to pull off honey each time. This year is still the same with only 2 hives. However, I am willing try again. I am having fun raising bees and enjoy the challenge.” (SG)

As mentioned in the previous newsletter email, we love hearing from you all. Give me your stories. Anything interesting happen with your bees this past year? Any new processes you would like to share? I know, especially the new beekeepers enjoy hearing from the experienced keepers.

Club President Message

Welcome to a new year, such as it is. It is with great frustration that I write this because of all that is going on around us is hampering what is going on within the FCBA. This Covid thing has us (FCBA) in a bind, no matter how you cut it. Obviously none of us have a clue about how mandates and the impact of the vaccine will shape our future activities. Personal opinions aside, we need to be smart & follow the recommended guidance to ensure safety. Exactly what that guidance is, many times is seemingly contradictory & subject to personal interpretation. We need to be understanding of those who do not feel comfortable in situations where some of might be comfortable.

Going online is an option, but not everyone is comfortable or capable of that (not to mention some of our activities just need to be “in person”). Given that criteria, the easiest answer would be to suspend all activity, which is not good for anyone, especially new beekeepers & the bees.

The reality is that we cannot find a venue for in-person meetings so we haven't been able to schedule anything. The Basic Beginning Beekeepers (BBB) class is in that situation as well. I have asked the education committee to prepare for a totally online BBB class with a strong field day. If we can find a venue we will do in-person for those comfortable with that, provided it's not specifically prohibited (I have a business considering allowing us to use their back garage).

Mentoring is going to need to be strengthened so please consider volunteering for that no matter how qualified you feel. We can help you with “qualifications”, but without volunteering you lose the opportunity to help and someone may not get the kind of help you can offer, (the fact that I've been helping mentor should scare some of you into volunteering, lol).

General club meetings are not something I feel we can even address until we have a viable location.

We are going to have to do officer elections this year...somehow (seriously, this really has been fun, but I strongly feel it's in everyone's best interest to have a new president next year). All I can say is “stay tuned” we're doing the best that we can.

Thanks for reading.

I hope you all stay well!

I'm holding my breath for spring!