

Foodie Freak: What's killing the honeybee?

Contributed by Ross Christensen
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Being a gardener, mead brewer and occasional resident of the planet, I have a love of honeybees and the honey they produce.

You may have heard in the news that honeybees are disappearing at an alarming rate and that we should all be very afraid of the consequences. Albert Einstein is credited with a now infamous quote that if the honeybee disappeared from the planet mankind would be extinct within four years.

I can happily say that my genius is so great that I can knowledgeably disagree with Einstein's opinion on the subject. I'll admit it's pretty easy to argue with someone who is dead and can't defend their comments; nevertheless, I shall present you with my evidence to ease your troubled mind.

Reports on the cause of the honeybee disappearance vary from Colony Collapse Disorder to honeybee HIV to deadly mites. There are even reports that cell phone signals cause honeybees to get lost and never make it back home. With all this happening it seems we're doomed before I can even start on the problem. Let me explain what's going on.

Colony Collapse Disorder is the catchphrase used to describe what is happening to all of the honeybees, but there is no one thing that anyone can point at and say, "THIS is what is happening!" Colony Collapse Disorder is just a label used for the sake of discussion. As of now nobody has found any single definable reason that is causing beehives to lose 30 percent to 70 percent of their population in a short period of time.

Getting an explanation about the theories of Colony Collapse Disorder from a group of beekeepers is like asking how to fix the economy from a roomful of economists: you'll get a lot of stories and theories but in the end be no closer to knowing what to do.

There are certain symptoms that occur to let you know that your beehives are suffering from Colony Collapse Disorder but nobody can say why the process occurs. It's like trying to explain why Ryan Seacrest is famous: he just is, but nobody can explain how he did it or why he's still around with any reasonable justification.

Some laypeople have coined the term "honeybee HIV," as if giving the condition a more frightening name will cause people concern and spur them into action. Honeybee colonies are susceptible to many pests and diseases, including some viruses, but not anything that attacks the immune systems in a way similar to HIV. The average beekeeper is aware of the illnesses that afflict honeybees and can treat for all of them.

Colony Collapse Disorder and bee HIV have been blamed for the loss of entire colonies of bees. Although many reports talk about beekeepers losing massive numbers of bees, this "disorder" doesn't seem to be as prevalent in wild bees or hobbyists' colonies.

One apiarist (beekeeper) I spoke to said it is found most commonly in the large commercial beehives that are driven across California's Central Valley and other massive orchard areas.

The bees are taken by truck to one location and released to forage and pollinate. At sunset they return to their mobile hive, and overnight are driven to a new location to be released again. Often the fields they visit don't provide enough food for the entire colony to survive so the beekeepers supplement their food with sugar water.

The apiarist I spoke with compared this treatment of commercial bees to being a traveling salesman who spends his working life flying across the country eating junk food all of the time; after a while he would naturally become run down and sickly.

Now call me crazy, but running these migrant bees off their wings day in and day out and feeding them junk food just makes conditions ripe for these poor bees to collapse but that wouldn't explain all of the problems.

Another thing might be a tiny species of mite called a Varroa mite that can climb onto a honeybee, feed on it and eventually kill it. When the bee dies the mite moves to the next bee or larvae in the hive. Enough of these mites can destroy an entire colony, and these mites are now spreading across the United States.

The European honeybees that American beekeepers currently raise are very susceptible to this mite. Asian and African honeybees are known to remove and kill mites as infested honeybees enter the hive. The Asian style of beehives is different from western hives and it allows for more interaction between the bees, which in turn provides more of a chance of a mite being seen and removed. So even if every bee in the US dies from mites, Asian honeybees can fill the gap.

The idea of cell phones affecting a honeybee's ability to find its way home is laughable at best. We have known for a long time that when a honeybee locates a plentiful food source like a field of clover, she (all of the bees you see collecting nectar and pollen are female; yes, yes, women of all species have it rough, they are under-appreciated martyrs, fine, I get it) returns to the hive and does a dance that tells the other girls how to find the field by using the position of the sun. Experts in bee behavior can actually watch this dance and tell you where the bee is guiding the others to go. So unless cell phones are changing the position of the sun, this theory doesn't even qualify as junk science.

So there is some confusion about what's causing the bees to die off, some ideas bogus and inflammatory, and some ideas legitimate. Just for argument's sake, how about we assume the absolute worst? Bee HIV-infested mites using cell phones manage to kill every honeybee on every continent.

I still don't have any worries; we'll be fine. Why am I so confident? I mean, besides having the ability to outthink nuclear physicists? Why, when Albert Einstein says mankind would be extinct in four years, do I rest easy at

night?

First of all, honeybees aren't native to North America and yet pollination has been occurring here without their production skills for longer than man has been on this continent. Many things pollinate plants. Orchard Mason bees are excellent pollinators and I recommend them for every gardener. They can even be purchased to improve pollination in your home garden. They are smaller than a housefly and fairly docile. Their sting is milder than that of honeybees, being merely annoying with the pain dissipating almost instantly after a sting (I know from experience).

Bumble bees also are first-rate pollinators that are very docile, and they are very easy to see buzzing about your garden. Bumble bee homes are also available to purchase to encourage a colony on your property. There are also species of flies, moths, bats and rodents that pollinate plants.

Pitcairn Island also will save us. The descendants of the mutineers on The Bounty have a honeybee industry that is a source of income for the island, and they can boast the only completely disease-free honeybee population in the world.

Since the island is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean their bees can't intermingle with other honeybees and contract any of the diseases they may have. So if all of our bees die off, they can slowly but surely re-supply the planet with their extra queens once our problems are dealt with. Keep in mind they don't accept bee-related donations in order to stay disease free. You can purchase Pitcairn Island Honey on the Internet to support their community at www.nic.pn/shop/honey.html.

Now, even if all these methods weren't enough, if faced with extinction mankind has a special knack for preventing that very outcome. I'm sure we would see advertisements on daytime TV for "colleges"; promoting their new "flower pollinator"; degree.

A while back I spoke to a bee removal company about taking down a hive in a tree near my home. They said that due to all the factors that are afflicting bees these days and the fact that nobody is medicating them, the colony would no doubt die off on its own within two years. It's now three years later and the hive is still there and going strong. There are also several more trees with hives in them in my neighborhood. So that (in a small anecdotal way) disproves that it is affecting ALL the honeybees.

About 20 years ago there was a lot of concern about the disappearance of bees and many bee removal services were removing wild bees from homes and properties for free so they could keep the bees for themselves. This practice is no longer followed and people are often stunned when beekeepers quote prices to remove swarming bees. The reason is that the market for these bees just isn't there like it was in the past. It's like calling someone to remove a skunk from your house: there isn't really a market for secondhand skunks so you're going to have to pay for its removal.

Now that I have made my case and have proven that I have a brain the size of the planet, but before I go on to disprove Einstein's theory of relativity and show that it's actually ME the solar system rotates around, I will have to confess one thing. There is no evidence that Albert Einstein ever actually made any quotes about honeybees; it's just an Internet rumor like Nostradamus predicting 9/11 or that Nigerian princess who wants to give you millions of dollars if you will simply cash a check for her. So relax. Bees or no bees, Colony Collapse Disorder or just a life cycle, we'll be OK.

Ross A. Christensen is an award-winning gardener and gourmet cook. He is the author of "Sushi A to Z, The Ultimate Guide" and is currently working on a new book. He has been a public speaker for many years and enjoys being involved in the community.

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