



BUSY BEES

KC Carpenters Help Bring Honeybees to Inner City



An unusual non-profit in Kansas City is tackling two problems with one of nature's most fascinating insects.

Where vacant lots once stood, blemishing inner city neighborhoods, honeybee farms are moving in, putting domestic natural resources to good use. Bees are pollinators and essential to our food chain. At least 80% of the planet's crop species require pollination to grow.

But pollinating insects are on the decline worldwide due to overuse of pesticides and destruction of their natural habitats, and some species are now on the danger list for extinction.

Bringing honey-producing bees to big cities is a growing trend. Chicago, Milwaukee and Detroit have each launched programs in recent years trying to increase bee populations. A group of dedicated enthusiasts called Mo Hives broke ground a year ago on Kansas City's first urban bee farm. Co-founder Dr. Marion Pierson said her non-profit was able to get the use of six eyesore lots on the south side of the city that had been sitting vacant for over a decade.

"They're were just collecting trash and debris and all kinds of activity that was not good for the neighborhood. We removed 300 pounds of trash and set up the hive," Pierson said.

Carpenter apprentices pitched in, helping Mo Hives design and build a fence made of wood and galvanized tin that's keeping the hive safe from any intruders who might accidentally wander onto the property. The fence also helps reassure any residents nervous about having a bee colony in their neighborhood.



Many bee hobbyists believe the insects thrive better in cities than in rural areas where they are susceptible to agricultural pesticides and a limited variety of plants to feed on.





Apprentices Jesten Eggers (left) and Logan Caldwell (right) pitch in building a fence in Kansas City's Blue Hills neighborhood, home to Mo Hives' first urban bee farm.

Electric company Evergy donated materials, which Mo Hives said was crucial to getting the project off the ground.

Apprentice coordinator Bob Hale said close to 20 carpenter students spent three days working on the fence.

Mo Hives is being strategic, building in neighborhoods that already have thriving community gardens. "We want the residents to recognize immediately the connection between what we're doing with the honeybees and what they're doing with growing their own food," Pierson said.

More popular than you might realize, urban beekeeping has been spinning off its own cottage industry of locally grown honey. The health benefits are well-known (it can kill bacteria and fungus, help heal wounds, and soothe sore throats) but only if the honey is raw.

Most of what is on your grocery store shelf is processed, pasteurized and heated to the point that beneficial nutrients are lost. So far, Mo Hives has only produced enough raw honey to give away to volunteers and people in the neighborhood, but the group hopes to eventually start packaging and selling at local farmers markets.



A pediatrician by trade, Pierson said commercial honey manufacturers often add corn syrup and sweetener but the raw variety is the purest and perfectly safe for most people to consume every day. However, she does caution that infants under one-year-old should never be given honey.

Individual bees live just a few weeks, while the colony can survive for many years. About 150,000 bees are buzzing around the apiaries that Mo Hives has built. "We thought the fear factor would be our biggest hurdle but when you educate people about bees they are more curious than fearful and that's been a big surprise for us," Pierson said. Building a fence around the farm and keeping the area clean and attractive has helped convince neighbors that bee hives in the heart of the city are not only safe but a welcomed solution to the blight and decay that vacant lots inflict on communities.

Being a new and small non-profit, Mo Hives is relying on generosity and volunteer elbow grease to make all of this happen. Pierson said help from the Carpenters union has been greatly appreciated. "The fence is absolutely beautiful and it's been amazing to see how service oriented your apprentices are. We are so grateful."