

Jamestown honeybees create special flavor

By Michaela Kennedy

Jamestown honey is as delicate as the life of the honeybee itself. Pale gold sweetness accompanies a light, sweet aroma, a scent no resident or visitor is soon to forget.

Beekeeper Darcy Magratten is one of a small handful of beekeepers on the island cares for honeybees so they may create their form of ambrosia. The special nature of this home island honey could be linked to the locust trees, Darcy has heard other beekeepers around the state say. But she doubts the theory. "We don't have an extraordinary number of locust trees here." Plenty of wildflowers, berry bushes and fruit tree blossoms offer choice nectar for the honeybees from spring through fall.

Magratten has kept honeybees for almost seven years. Initially, she cared for three hives in her back yard. A few years later, she thought the Jamestown Community Farm would be a good spot for the apiaries. Farm coordinator Bob Sutton agreed the idea was good, and built a platform for them in a corner of the field.

Honeybees are not indigenous to the area, and are lucky to live more than one season. Magratten said that the climate on Jamestown is difficult for them. If the temperature rises in a warm winter, they begin to fly and lose the warmth of the colony that protects the queen. "We tend to lose about half of the hives every year," she said.

Volunteer helper Barry Cook

grins when asked if he had any previous experience with beekeeping. "None," he said. He thanks his wife, Carla, for leading him to the apiary opportunity. She is a golfing buddy of Magratten's, and volunteers at the community farm. When Magratten asked her if she knew anyone that might be interested in helping to take care of the bees, she suggested her husband. "Carla had a sense," Barry Cook said.

Some beehive caretakers use smoke to temporarily distract the bees in order to work with the hive. The island volunteers have never tried to smoke the bees. "I prefer bee whispering," Cook said. "It's a case of being comfortable around the bees, and they are comfortable around us. Darcy is the model of that."

Knowing when the bees are doing well and are in a good mood is essential, Magratten adds. Sunny, warm days are better times to visit, rather than in rainy weather when the colonies have been cooped up in the hive, not able to collect nectar.

Cook veers off into the brush to dismiss a bee that is pursuing his screened face. Magratten explains that the bees will not follow him. "If you are followed by a bee, head for the bushes," she said. "They won't follow." Trying to run from a bee or swat at it will only increase the danger, she added. A honeybee will die after one sting, but the mark it leaves on the body will attract others to sting in the same place, multiplying the

venom impact.

Soon after he began working with Darcy and the bees, Cook realized the tiny animals surrounded him. "It struck me that I was immersed in bees," he said. "I thought about them when I wasn't here."

The stereophonic effect of the buzzing colonies impressed Barry, and he wanted to share the encounter with others. He made a binaural recording of the humming workers. Posing a dummy head in front of a hive, he videoed the entrance of the busy hive. With a computer and a pair of headphones, anyone can visit the bees virtually online at www.vimeo.com/1296523, or search online for "binaural buzzing beehive at Vimeo."

In addition to Magratten's beehives, the community farm bought and owns three hives as well. The farm sells most of the honey produced by the six hives, and the money helps pay for next year's seeds. The honey is available at the farm stand on Saturdays. "Barry and I keep a small portion to give away to friends. So essentially, the endeavor is to benefit the farm," Darcy said.

The two honeybee mavens have found the beekeeping experience to be a rewarding adventure. The hard-working insects pollinate nearby crops and provide a tasteful staple singular to Jamestown, in thanks to their care. "It's an intense sensory experience doing something that has meaning in the biosphere," Cook said.



Tree City USA

Jamestown was named a Tree City USA by the Arbor Day Foundation for the sixth consecutive year. On hand to update the sign with the latest award were, from left to right, Tony Antine, Emmet Turley, Jim Rugh and Tree Warden Steve Saracino.

Photo by Andrea von Hohenleiten

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