



A Considerable Town //

A NATURAL BUZZ

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Beekeeping guru preaches spirit of the beehive

BY DAVID COTNER

Modern talk of bees tends to dwell on their deficiencies more than their benefits. Colony Collapse Disorder. Fatal bee-sting allergies.

Killer bees both Africanized and *Saturday Night Live*. But honey is a food that keeps indefinitely, much like the Metrol trains that buzz incessantly on this warm Sunday afternoon in Atwater Crossing while the Backwards Beekeepers — a diverse group actively caring for the fate of bees in L.A. — convene their latest meeting.

For the past three years, Backwards Beekeepers have moved, saved and nurtured wild beehives where they find them. Their Bee Rescue hotline — (213) 373-1104 — takes 600 to 800 calls each month from Southern California residents who encounter hives in places one might not ordinarily expect to discover bees. The insects regularly find their way into attics, irrigation control boxes, even stereo speakers — anywhere a swarm and its queens can take up residence.

The tone of the meeting is pragmatic and accomplished: no talk of Colony Collapse Disorder here, no traumatic memories of getting killed by the swarm of bees during an especially violent game of Crystal Castles down at the arcade.

One woman reports harvesting 60 pounds of honey from her salvaged bees. These beekeepers use no chemicals in the

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rescue and control of their bees and, unlike industrial beekeepers, they don't kill the hive by the inescapably brutal practice of injecting acid into it every season.

Their approach is to let nature take its course. Bees swarm where they want to swarm; they hive where they want to hive. If bees die, they die. It's a refreshingly simple and fearless throwback to the pastimes of a bygone Los Angeles — 213 area code notwithstanding — recalling an era during which television stations turned off for a few hours overnight, and the greatest excitement was culled from the natural world.

Kirk Anderson, the Backwards Beekeepers' sardonic and direct guru, leads the meeting. He offers sage slivers of advice for the care and keeping of the bees in a way that comes off as completely natural but in reality stems from decades of observational experience that began in the 1970s, when he ordered bees through the mail from the Montgomery Ward catalog.

Beekeeping may seem like something to be pursued by specialists, involving arcane knowledge or insect sorcery. But, Anderson says, "We want to show everyone that it's easy," wryly promising, "You don't have to be a brain surgeon or a politician to do it." For those who were brought to the meeting because of the stern warnings of the recent documentary *Vanishing of the Bees*, Anderson stresses, "There are plenty of bees — nature keeps that bucket pretty full."

Hands shoot up during the question-and-answer session. Are my hives getting too hot? Do I need to register my hives with the City of Los Angeles? What happens if another hive of bees robs my hive and kills the queen? Should I count the number of mites in the hive?

To this last question, Anderson replies, "You know what you get after you count all the mites? A total."

It's all part of the natural order of bees, the cycle of life and death, as it is in all things. Afterward, Backwards Beekeepers co-founder Russell Bates discusses the documentary he and wifely co-founder Amy Seidenwurm are filming about Anderson, who is regarded here with a respect bordering on the reverent.

"I don't want this documentary that we're making — *The Backwards Beekeeper* — to be very preachy, self-serious or boring," Bates says. "I also don't want for it to come across as whiny or overly alarmist, because I don't have an alarmist viewpoint on this."

"We bought books about beekeeping — they all made it look like a total drag. They were about all the stuff that can go wrong. I was just reading and thinking, 'This just sounds like such a total chore.'"

"Kirk is really at the center of this movie. He was our inspiration for founding Backwards Beekeepers. We encountered Kirk via a guy who runs L.A. Honey Supply, which is the only place in L.A. where you can buy beekeeping supplies. It was just the greatest breath of fresh air. He explained to us how he had learned from other beekeepers he had done research with that you don't need to worry about chemicals. You don't need to worry about mites. You don't need to worry about diseases."

Bates pauses for a moment and reveals, "What we need to be doing is to encourage the bees to survive on their own — like they've been doing for 300 million years."