

Bees in the City

Trenton Makes, again. Have you heard of the high-quality honey coming out of the city of Trenton? Over the past few years, Isles, a community development and environmental group that builds homes, gardens, parks and renovates former factories, also builds and manages beehives. A dozen hives now produce over 400 pounds of high-quality honey each year, with rave reviews. Recently, we got great news – Isles' honey won first prize in a blind taste test at the NJ Beekeepers Association annual Honey Show. Beekeepers from around the state participated, with awards given by professional judges. Award-winning entries were then displayed at the statehouse.

Given the negative news about what goes on in Trenton, we thought you should know about the good stuff too – and why we think our honey is so sweet. For those of us that live and work in New Jersey cities, this award isn't just an interesting take on why Trenton hives succeed when other beehives are collapsing. To us, Trenton hives symbolize the competitive advantages of cities, including their diversity of plants, caring people, and now insects.

Why does our honey taste so good? It starts with Trenton's diverse nectar and pollen sources. Unlike farm areas with acres of single crops, Trenton has wildly disparate plants, trees, flowers, and shrubs (even invasive species) that offer bees a smorgasbord of options. This includes beneficial sources of fungi, which can help bees resist colony collapse, which affects hives across North America. Research shows that chemicals, loss of forage, and pathogens are ravaging bee colonies. Like people, what bees ingest is not just food – it is medicine that keeps them healthy.

Second, few city dwellers use pesticides and other biocides. Isles partnered with the NJ Beekeepers Association on a USDA-funded study to measure the pesticide levels from pollen in hives situated in different areas. The findings: more pesticides are found in rural and suburban pollen! Lower income communities spend less of their scarce money on chemicals for their lawns and plants, but too often, large-scale farms have no such qualms. In Trenton and older suburban neighborhoods, Isles cleans up the ecosystem further by supporting 70+ community and school gardens, improving parks, and cleaning up homes using organic practices. The soil and buildings in Trenton are getting cleaner, for people and insects like bees.

Third, across the country, anywhere from 33% to 50% of bee colonies die each winter. In Trenton, with careful management and healthier sources of forage, we lose only 20% of Isles' bees.

Finally, thoughtful, caring humans help keep our bees happy and productive. Led by lead beekeeper Jim Simon, Isles uses no synthetic chemicals to treat for varroa mites, the global scourge of beekeepers that serves as a vector for other diseases that affect honeybees. After harvest, we don't heat our honey - we minimally filter and bottle it by hand. When bees swarm (one of their natural reproductive instincts), we find them and give them a new home. When

warmer winter thaws occur (which come more frequently), and bees start eating their stored honey, we intervene and add additional food to the hives.

Because of these factors, our bees are more resilient, healthy, and productive. They bring benefits to all living things in our region. And since the average bee flies within a 5-mile radius, our bees make it out into Hamilton, Ewing, Lawrenceville and into Pennsylvania. They don't care about municipal or other political boundaries!

We also train and then rely on Trenton students at Isles Youth Institute, where they help to keep our 500,000 bees happy. These young adults become more caring, knowledgeable stewards of bees. Patrick Maxime, a Haitian-born Isles Youth Institute graduate who works on our Urban Agriculture crew, is a fearless and competent beekeeper. Our Tucker Street educational garden has been home to a beehive for eight years and we recently installed an indoor observation hive that can be safely viewed from behind planes of glass. What started as a way to teach children and adults about the valuable role that pollinators play in the food system is now an exciting microenterprise.

Bees are wild animals, and of course, for those that are allergic, they can be dangerous. But they benefit our world immensely, and part of our job is to share that story with others, along with the fact that other stinging insects are more dangerous.

With this statewide award under our belt, perhaps New Jerseyans can think differently about urban bees. Wouldn't it be great if we could now do the same for those of us that live in cities - especially young people? We too, are more resilient, diverse, and beneficial to the planet than we tend to get credit for.

Marty Johnson, Founder and President of Isles
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