Hive Update

We are now at about week seven since we first installed the hives. They are progressing well, but one is clearly doing much better than the other. This could be because we used natural wax foundation in one hive, and plastic in the other. So far it seems that the bees really prefer the wax. Experienced beekeepers advise new beekeepers to start with two hives so that they can be compared. It’s easy to see why that is good advice. It’s hard to know what’s normal with only one hive!

Bee Job Descriptions

In a colony of bees there are many jobs to be done, and each bee is assigned a particular task. The queen spends all day laying eggs. She will live for several years before she becomes less productive, at which point she will need to be replaced. The drones are all male and have only one job, to mate with the queen. The drones are larger, with big wrap-around eyes, as can be seen in this picture. They have no stingers so feel free to pick one up for a close look! The remaining worker bees are all female, and may do one of a variety of tasks throughout their lifetime. Foragers gather honey and pollen and bring it back to the hive. Housekeeping bees remove debris and waste from the hive. Undertaker bees carry off the dead bees. If you sit by a hive for a while, you will inevitably see an undertaker bee fly off carrying a dead bee. It’s hard to image how they can fly while carrying their own weight, but they do.

Swarm!

A swarm of bees sounds like a scary thing, but it’s actually a natural way for the hive to reproduce itself. No-one knows exactly why or when bees decide to swarm, but when they do, the queen takes off with half of the colony. They typically land in a large ball on a nearby tree and send out scouts to look for a new home. In this picture you can see my bees after they swarmed and landed on my neighbor’s arbor. Fortunately my neighbors were not worried! They know that a swarm is not dangerous. The bees are quite vulnerable at this stage and are actually quite docile. I’ve heard that you can stick your hand into the middle of a swarm without getting stung. (I haven’t tried this). Never spray a swarm with pesticides! If you see a swarm on campus, call security. They have a list of local beekeepers who will come and remove the swarm. Since a colony of bees with a queen costs about $100, a swarm is actually a valuable commodity.

Honey Myths and Facts

Many people claim that honey is healthier and more nutritious than sugar. Is it true? This article from the Seattle PI extols the health benefits of honey and claims that it enhances immune function. On the other hand, the New York Times science section reports that research has refuted the widely held belief that eating local honey helps relieve allergy symptoms. It should also be noted that infants less one year old should not be given honey as it may contain botulism spores. One thing is not in dispute. Honey may not help your allergies or cure your cold, but it’s a delicious natural product that has not been shown to have any adverse health effects for adults.