

This article appeared in the Baltimore Sun weekly column “Neighbors.”
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With summer creeping up on us, it’s hard to think about preparing for winter, but that’s just what local honeybees are doing. This is the beginning of peak honey producing season, known as the honey flow—a time when bees take advantage of the pollen available from spring blooms and make as much honey as they can to help feed the hive through the coming winter.>

For local apiarists, or beekeepers, it’s an important time to tend to the health of their bees and start gearing up for the busy harvest season. **Rick and Betsy Derrick** are keeping their eyes on the six hives they keep on their **Galesville** property. >

What started 12 years ago, as a one-hive-hobby for Rick has grown into a large side business for both of them. They now run Freestate Bees, with six hives on their property and seven more in Davidsonville, Owensville, and Fairhaven. In addition to selling local honey, they import honey from the south and sell beekeeping equipment. >

When he began his apiary adventure, Rick, a financial planner in Annapolis, bought one hive. “Back then, I didn’t know anything about keeping bees,” he said, “I put them in a truck, set it up in the back yard, bought a book and started reading.” Betsy was less enthusiastic for the first five or six years, but, according to Rick, has come to enjoy beekeeping even more than her husband, despite an allergy to bee stings. >

“The Honey flow in Maryland typically lasts from Middle of May to June,” Derrick said, and the demand for local honey is so great, the Derrick’s harvest it as soon as they can. “You don’t have to harvest it until later, but locals are always crying for it,” he said. “We can sell all we can get, so we extract it in the end of June.”>

Derrick said one hive needs between 60 to 80 pounds of honey to survive the winter. Anything above that is called overflow and can be harvested. He said he harvests an average of 50 pounds of honey per hive. But it can vary from year to year and hive to hive from over 100 pounds to nothing.>

Free State Bees, however, is among the larger bee keeping businesses in the state. According to **Bart Smith of Maryland Department of Agriculture**, there are 326 colonies in Anne Arundel County kept by 89 keepers. He said 94 percent of all the beekeepers in Maryland own fewer than 10 hives, and 55 percent own only one or two hives. >

Naturally, honey is not a major contributor to Maryland’s economy. But honeybees are, according to Smith. “There are about \$40 million worth of Maryland crops that either benefit from or require honeybee pollination,” Smith said. Honeybees are “very important to the pollination of vine crops,” he continued, “watermelons, cantaloupes, pumpkins, squash.” And because mites decimated the wild bee population, some farmers

rent honeybee hives from beekeepers to pollinate their crops. “Bees are rented for blueberries, strawberries, oh, yeah and of course apples,” Smith said. >

Derrick said he tried renting his bees out to farmers one year, but it was stressful on him and the bees. He said, however, that his neighbors enjoy the benefits of pollinators living so close to their gardens. >

“Most neighbors like to have honeybees around once you explain that they’re not aggressive like yellow jackets and they are going to help with pollination,” Derrick said. It probably helps that he offers them jars of honey in June and says, “this is from your flowers.”>

A few years ago, the Derricks had 20 hives on their 1.5-acre lot, and water supply became an issue. In their quest for water, the bees congregated around neighbors’ birdbaths and water spigots. The Derrick’s have since scaled back. >

Despite concerns over being stung, Smith said working with bees is safe with proper training and experience. “Like people, bees are nice to work with but there’s always a few ornery ones out there,” he said. “I’ve been known to go thorough a hundred colonies a day and not get stung. And I’ve been known to go through one hive and get stung a dozen times.” >

A beekeeper himself for close to 30 years, Smith keeps a couple of colonies at his Crownsville home and harvests honey for a hobby. And he oversees the hives that the Department of Agriculture keeps for educational purposes around the county. >

Stephen Barry, Coordinator of Outdoor Education for Anne Arundel County Public Schools, said that his programs have kept hives at three different sites in cooperation with Smith for at least 15 years. >

At one site, the West River United Methodist Center, in **West River**, director **Andy Thornton** said they created a log hive in addition to their traditional observation hive to simulate a more natural environment. “We took a piece of pine, hollowed it out and put the bees in.” The hives are visited daily by school children in the outdoor education program and then in the summer by participants in the center’s camp programs.>

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