

# Honey of a hobby

AREA ABUZZ WITH  
BACKYARD BEEKEEPERS

STORY BY LAURA BERNHEIM  
PHOTOS BY MATT STAMEY

**D**RIVING PAST CINDY Belknap's house just outside the city limits, you wouldn't know about her fascinating hobby.

Her neighborhood looks like any other, with houses set back from the road, surrounded by large trees. Step into her backyard and you still wouldn't likely be able to put your finger on it.

You wouldn't know she cares for tens of thousands of bees until you spot four unassuming white boxes way back in the corner. As you get closer, you hear the hum of the 30,000 to 60,000 honeybees as they toil away in each hive.

Florida has roughly 1,900 registered beekeepers but only a handful are commercial businesses. The vast majority are like Belknap, who leaves her full-time job at the University of Florida Foundation and dons a jacket with a large screened-in hood.

"I don't wear that big suit, but I don't like to get stung, either," she says as she zips up. "Every time a bee stings you, they die. If you can discourage them from stinging, then really it's doing them a service."

In her two years caring for bees, Belknap has been stung only four times. As a further precaution, she tucks her pant legs into her socks.

"You look like a dork, but it's just being smart," she says.

Approaching the hives, bees whiz past her head. They'll travel up to two or three miles to



CINDY BELKNAP SHOWS OFF HER BEES.

collect nectar and pollen. Even though hundreds of bees hover around her, Belknap remains calm. She inspects the hives once or twice a week in the summer, when the bees are most active.

"If you move slow and are just very gentle, they don't bother you," she says. "You can have thousands of bees flying all around you. They'll land on you, walk around, they're really gentle. You just go into a Zen state."

After examining her beehives, Belknap notices a worker bee buzzing around on the inside of her screened-in hood. Instead of flailing in panic, which might seem natural to most, she chuckles and continues carefully removing

the jacket.

She sneaks out of the infiltrated jacket unstung and unfazed. Encounters like that are why beekeeping fascinates her.

"It makes you feel more in touch with nature," she said. "This has been one of the most rewarding hobbies that I've had."

Belknap, UFF's director of stewardship and donor relations, picked up her first hive three years ago from Dadant & Sons in High Springs. "Just put it in the backseat and drove it home," she says.

At a fundraising conference in New York a few months earlier, she listened as another participant described the bees he kept in Boston.





**BELKNAP BLASTS A PUFF OF SMOKE FROM BURNING PINE NEEDLES ONTO THE HIVE TO HELP CONTROL THE BEES.**

"I told him, 'Just sit down and tell me everything,'" she says. "The more he talked, the more it sounded so fun."

Back in Gainesville, she was quickly referred to Jamie Ellis, assistant professor of entomology and head of Florida's Honey Bee Research and Extension Lab. The lab also organizes an annual "Bee College" in St. Augustine that brings in experts from across the country to speak.

"There's so much to learn, you wouldn't believe the knowledge you can get if you want to," she says.

Before bringing hundreds of stinging insects to her neighborhood, she approached people who lived nearby to make sure it was OK and that no one was severely allergic.

"I promised I'd give them honey, and it's been great," she says with a laugh. "Now my neighbors say their flowers look better than ever."

Each of Belknap's hives bring in 80 to 120 pounds of honey yearly that she gives away.

Honey, however, isn't always guaranteed. Ellis, who lives surrounded by oaks and other non-flowering trees in High Springs, never harvests from his "crazy strong" hives at his house.

Bees rely on the stored honey for food between nectar flows in the spring and fall. In areas with lots of blooming plants, keepers can take surplus honey for use in the kitchen.

"Where I live, they are producing honey but not in enough volume where they produce surplus honey," Ellis says. "There's not enough for me to harvest, unless I wanted to harm the colony."

Besides the honey, bee hives promote healthy plant life by pollinating the flowers they

encounter. Commercial beekeepers truck colonies to various farms to increase the pollination in crops such as oranges, blueberries and almonds.

"It's one of the few hobbies that give back," Ellis says, contrasting beekeeping with golfing. "Unless you win a major or make the PGA Tour, you're not going to get anything back from golf. With bees, you get honey and a pollinated garden. It's a win, win."

Even though he has to move his hives to reap the sweet benefits, Ellis enjoys partaking in what he has always been told is the oldest agricultural endeavor. He says rock paintings depicting beekeeping are thousands of years old.

Unlike other forms of agriculture, cities are preferable to host bees.

"Farms aren't landscaped, but cities are," Ellis says. "There are flowering trees, gardens, shrubs... the potential for a lot more nectar."

Gainesville in particular is ideal for novice beekeepers, Ellis and Belknap agree, pointing to resources at UF and local beekeeping clubs.

Belknap ended her term as president of the Alachua County Beekeepers Club in December and created a club in Gainesville, which meets the first Thursday of each month at Florida's entomology lab and has roughly 50 members. Levy, Putnam, Dixie and Clay counties have all formed groups to discuss colony health, how to promote beekeeping and how to

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## IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

- Gather information from local beekeepers at area club meetings.
- **Alachua County Beekeepers Club** meets at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month at Hitchcock's Supermarket, 15560 US Highway 441 in Alachua.
- **Gainesville Area Bee Club** meets at 7 p.m. on the first Thursday of each month at the University of Florida's Honey Bee Research & Extension Lab, which is in Building No. 970 on Natural Area Drive.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- In one collection trip, a worker bee will visit about 100 flowers.
- In a lifetime, a worker bee will produce 1/12 teaspoon of honey.
- In total, hives travel 55,000 miles and hit 2 million flowers for one pound of honey.
- Worker bees carry more than half their body weight in nectar and pollen.
- During winter months, bees must produce about 35 pounds of honey to have enough food and nutrients for the colony to survive.
- A hive of bees can make and store up to two pounds of honey each day.
- Each year, the average American consumes just over one pound of honey.

## BEEKEEPING CALENDAR

- **Summer:** Examine the hives weekly and watch for swarming, or signs the colony might create a new queen and move.
- **Fall:** Harvest the honey, but make sure to leave about 60 pounds for the colony to use during the winter. Prepare for winter by ensuring the hives are dry and protected from the wind.
- **Winter:** Leave the bees alone. There is very little outside activity while they form clusters for warmth and ingest the remaining honey.
- **Spring:** Check the hives about once a month to make sure they aren't starving.

In addition to feeding, inspect the hives as the weather warms to make sure the queen is laying more and more eggs to prepare for the nectar flow.

*From "The Complete Guide to Beekeeping for Fun & Profit"*

## — GARRETTS —

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most people don't have that stuff all over."

The gallery windows and sliding-glass doors open up to a courtyard, which the Garretts transformed into a South Beach-styled haven. In addition to a comfortable sitting area and Tim's massive grill, the Garretts replaced gravel and overgrown shrubs with an infinity edge-inspired pool that juts up against a blue, iridescent tiled wall.

"The space was pretty much unusable as a garden when we moved in," Tim says. "It doesn't get enough light in the winter-time, but in the summer it gets too much sun. Putting in the pool made the space much more usable for the family."

Jenn found out she was pregnant with Davis while they were working on the courtyard. Davis loves to swim in the pool. His sister, Lane, who is 7 months old, will start lessons soon.

"We knew with all these doors leading out into the pool that they'd be in it," she says, explaining why she makes sure the kids learn to swim early. As a security measure, the pool is surrounded by a screen fence and the doors leading to the courtyard are equipped with alarms.

The other side of the gallery opens into the home's three bedrooms. Accordion doors run the length of the walls, allowing the Garretts to open the house even further.

"This was a really open floor plan for the 1960s, really modern for that era," Jenn says. "It works great for today, too, because the kids can open this up and look out into the courtyard and [it] makes the rooms feel a lot bigger."

The outer walls of the bedrooms feature decorative concrete screen blocks, where cut-out shapes allow for cross-ventilation when the sliding-glass doors are opened.

"It feels really tropical, like this

WANT TO SEE IT  
FOR YOURSELF?

If the pictures aren't enough, Tim and Jenn Garrett are hosting a fundraiser for the Harn Museum of Art on Sept. 1. Enjoy cocktails and hors d'oeuvres as you learn about the design, installation and care of outdoor sculptures.

**WHO:** The Garretts and the Harn Museum of Art  
**WHAT:** Come for Dinner: A Series of Benefit Events for the Harn Museum of Art

**WHERE:** 1004 NW 34th St.

**WHEN:** Sept. 1 at 6:30 p.m.

**COST:** \$75 per person

**FOR MORE INFO:** Contact Kelly Harvey at 352-392-9826, ext. 2109, or [kharvey@harn.ufl.edu](mailto:kharvey@harn.ufl.edu)

is their own little cabana off the pool," she says. "It's secure but also decorative and lets in natural light."

With ample windows offering views of the courtyard, the brightness throughout the house keeps a relaxed, organic vibe — and helps with the electric bill.

"We don't have a single light on in the house right now and hardly need them at all," Tim says. "There's not a part of the house except the bathroom that you need to turn a light on."

Having worked on the house for six years and seeing how Jenn decorates, Tim is well past his skepticism about living in the house. His original frustration with maintaining an older home has turned into awe and amazement.

"I can envision a molecule, but not a room, not what something will look like after it's painted and after you put art everywhere," he says. "There's not a house like this in Gainesville." 🍯

## — BEES —

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combat potential threats.

Colony Collapse Disorder is the "newest thing for people to get excited about," as Ellis describes it. To some, it's a phenomenon that can kill entire colonies without an obvious explanation. Others maintain it's an unfortunate confluence of common diseases and pests.

"CCD is not even in the top five list of things that kill honeybees," Ellis said. "As a hobbyist, I wouldn't worry about it at all. Even if they die, you've got the box you can put another colony in right away."

With equipment, it costs between \$150 and \$250 to start a colony — unless nature steps in on its own. Belknap recently helped transfer a colony that was developing under an overturned clay pot in someone's backyard.

"You have to stop and remember that they could really live on their own without any intervention from you," she says. "They've been around since the dinosaurs, so it's not as if they need us."

Belknap, thanks to the networking nature of beekeeping, has

shared her expertise with beginners, taken in a struggling hive and helped finished a book, "The Complete Guide to Beekeeping for Fun & Profit," that was printed by Atlantic Publishing Group in Ocala.

The swarm of area beekeepers show novices all the resources available right in their backyards.

"It's fun because we have people that have been keeping bees for 40 years, and then we have all the way down to someone just coming to learn before buying their first hive," Belknap says. "There's enough experienced people in the club that everyone takes a turn mentoring."

With so many local clubs, "equipment galore" available in High Springs, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, as well as UF's lab, the Gainesville area in particular is "the perfect area to get into beekeeping," Ellis says.

"We're all very accessible in my office," he continues. "We go out of our way to be available to help. Keeping bees in the Sunshine State is a great thing." 🍯



CINDY BELKNAP WORKS ON HER BEE HIVE IN HER BACKYARD.