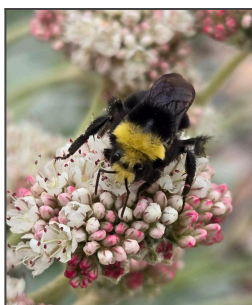




Napa County Beekeepers' Association Newsletter - July, 2026 issue #29

Our Mission: Supporting Napa's beekeeping community through educational outreach, treatment-free management, and pollinator habitat advocacy.

A few words from Martin



Greetings to you all! As of June 21, summer officially arrived, but we at the NCBA celebrated a few days earlier at our First Annual Solstice potluck and it was a HOOT! Thank you to everyone that attended and made it such a wonderful event. Please join us as we continue to focus on this

change of seasons at our regular club meeting on Monday, July 20, as well as at a club member hosted hive dive on Saturday, July 25 (see **Save the Date**).

Prior to our potluck meal, we opened up the club hive for an inspection and mite test which revealed that the colony is a little low on stores despite regular feeding of 1:1 sugar water, but otherwise looking great so far. The population was healthy, laying in a very even brood pattern and still building wax comb at an impressive rate. Our Varroa mite test yielded a count of 3 mites for 358 bees, or a 0.83% load (very low). This early season count gives us a base line to compare with tests later in the year and with other hives throughout the valley. A few attendees were still a little on the fence about conducting a mite alcohol wash, and I understand and share some of that concern. In the past, I too was hesitant to use this test. It can feel like we're ignoring our bee-centric practices because we are, in fact, choosing to kill around 300 young bees to run the test. And after all, those 300 bees aren't free! The hive spent a lot of resources to raise these bees over the last month and that work needs to be acknowledged and considered. But after seeing the results in hives both tested and not, I believe that the information provided is valuable enough to perform them. Visual

inspections can provide a lot of information about a hive's health, while measurable data from a mite test can fill in the gaps.

As a club, we've spent a great deal of time sharing the importance of taking quality and consistent notes during hive inspections. Detailed notes tell us how the hive was doing at any given time of the year, and they are still just as valuable and important as ever. However I'd like to add a second part to this academic side of beekeeping which I refer to as "the post inspection contemplation". This is the reflective time when we consider how the inspection went and critique *ourselves* as beekeepers. Once the hive has been closed up, we need to make it a priority to review our own actions and decisions made during the inspection. The most obvious form of this type of post-inspection thinking is the "Welp, I *DEFINITELY* won't be doing that again!" Fun Fact: I did one of those last month! As incredibly valuable as learning from a big mistake is, the smaller decisions and actions are just as important. These can range from our physical movement (how do we open the hive lids and move frames inside the box) to how do we prepare before the inspection even starts. Are we
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(A Few Words from Martin, continued from page 1)

moving in a smooth and relaxed way, or are we stiff, stressed or nervous? Do we have everything we will need ready and at hand? Smoker, torch, empty frames, hive tools, etc? Mistakes will happen, but if we

take some time to contemplate what went well and what didn't, we can make fewer of them in the future. This is how we can learn and improve our own beekeeping skills.

- Martin Podell

Save the Date - NCBA and Other Happenings

JULY NCBA CLUB MEETING

When: Monday, July 20

Come for one or all portions of the evening.

5 - 6pm: Club Hive Dive

6 - 6:30pm: Q&A (casual time for questions & guidance)

6:30 - 8pm: General Club Meeting

Where: Napa Grange, [3275 Hagen Road, Napa](#)

What: Focus is on summer hive management & mite testing



NCBA Hive Dive/Mite Testing Workshop

What: Join Rob and Christine Kurtz as they do a summer check on Emmanuelle's hive and demonstrate approaches for Varroa mite testing.

When: Saturday, July 25, 10 - 11:30am

Where: 📍 1237 Thompson Ave, Napa

Bring: your own protective gear



Beeco's Bee Talk



I'm sure to a number of you in my immediate bee circle I'm starting to sound a little bit like a broken record. I can't help it, it feels so important to me to try and get people to do their mite testing. Every fall, it never fails - we're going to see a large number of beekeepers lose their bees. It's like they get blindsided when their bees take a turn for the worse in October or November and succumb to Varroa. If only they'd tested the bees at least once, preferably twice, starting about now and then again in late September. If you test now and have high numbers, at least there's something you can do about it that might save your colony. On the other hand, if you test now and bees are carrying low loads, it's nice to check again in the fall to see if they held the numbers down. I've found from testing all of my hives last month that mite

loads this time of the year are all over the place - some colonies have tons, some have very few. A common misconception is that just because your monitoring tray has low mite counts, your colony generally does as well. That, too, I find goes both ways; you can have low numbers on your tray, but a high count on the test and vice versa. We're dealing with a very sensitive biological organism here. I'm finding the longer I work with bees, the more difficult it is to pin them down on just about anything, although I believe testing using the alcohol method

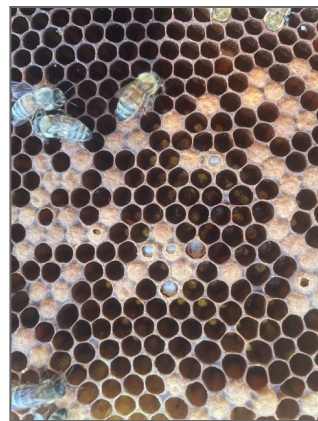
provides the best definitive answer regarding mite loads, along with actually looking at the brood to see how the bees are managing the mites, but let's save that for another newsletter.



Great brood pattern



I haven't seen a direct correlation between uncapping-recapping behavior and mite loads



Most mites latch onto bees' undersides, but are occasionally visible on top.

I also get it, the test has a decent price tag attached - 300 bees. But think about it, a healthy colony this time of year should have 40,000 to 60,000 bees, so 300 is a small price to pay for such a colossal information gain. It's healthy to push your beekeeping comfort zone. Seriously, my belief system has changed so much in the last few years. Back in the day I'd say, *"What's it matter how many mites my bees are carrying? Why test if I'm not going to treat?"* I gotta' say, it does matter, big time. If you're pushing 20+ mites per 300 bees (> 6.67%) this time of year, I'd be really surprised to see that colony alive in the spring. The industry standard is 6 mites per 300 bees - yikes. More than that and they say you've got dead bees walking. My experience is that those numbers are a little extreme. I've sent bees into winter with 56 mites per 300 bees (18.67%) and they made it. They were all on life support by the spring, but they *did* make it. However, any colonies with double digit percentages this early in the game are going to need some very serious hand holding and some divine intervention to survive the winter. Often the colony's decline comes on pretty quick - one week your bees will be flying and the next week you're getting robbed out.



Generally if you see this level of mites...



you will get test results like this.



Bees emerging with their tongues out indicate brood disease or neurological toxins.

I highly, *highly* suggest you attend the upcoming hands-on workshop at Emmanuelle's on July 25th where Christine Kurtz and I will be going over all things associated with the tests - how to properly conduct them, including where to get the sample bees within the hive, what the numbers mean, and what to do if your numbers are elevated. We'll even be comparing a CO₂ non-lethal testing alternative to the alcohol method. We will honor any bees we kill, have emotional support on hand, and make sure everyone fully understands the process so you too will feel comfortable testing at home with your own bees.

A few more thoughts for mite testing:

- The alcohol wash test will yield far more accurate mite count than sugar shake method.
- Bees to be tested should come from frames containing nurse bees, found on frames containing brood as well as adjacent frames of bee bread.

Options for colonies with high mite loads (we'll talk more about this at both the upcoming hive dive & club meeting):

- **Cage the queen** for a 30 day brood break which temporarily stops her from laying eggs, disrupting the mite life cycle.
- Use a **screened bottom with sticky board** to prevent dislodged mites from returning to hive.
- **Powdered sugar dusting** (not the same as powdered sugar mite test): Dusting adult bees with powdered sugar helps dislodge a portion of the mites by hindering their ability to grip the bees' exoskeletons (works best when paired with a screened bottom).
- **Drone brood culling**: Mites prefer to invade cells with drone larvae which take longer to develop and consequently enable heftier mite reproduction. By removing and freezing drone brood for 24-48 hours, then returning the frame to the hive for the bees to clean up, a significant number of developing mites can be eliminated. We do not necessarily advocate this method as drones play vital roles in the life of their hive and surrounding colonies, but consider this as a heroic measure if mite levels are super high. Also, as beekeepers it is helpful to be familiar with various possible, non-toxic approaches.

A few online resources to explore:

- Elizabeth Frost from NSW Tocal College demonstrates alcohol wash using widely available mite testing cup (pic at right): [Alcohol Wash for Varroa Mite](#)
- Randy Oliver: [How to perform an alcohol wash - Scientific Beekeeping](#)
- Randy Oliver's demonstration of a simple, homemade mite testing set-up *using Dawn dishwashing detergent* instead of alcohol: [An Improved, But Not Yet Perfect, Varroa Mite Washer - Scientific Beekeeping](#)



- Rob Keller

Tales from the Club Hive

May 20 - June 15: The feeder jar of 1:1 sugar water was replaced 2-3 times a week. Heavy population growth. Hive entrance is now facing south and away from the parking area.

June 7: Hive inspection showed solid laying pattern, some pollen, but few honey stores and some mild crosscombing. Comb was cut and straightened where needed. J-frame was added using a piece of comb removed from a crosscombed section and placed in the center of the brood nest.



June 15: Still not much honey stored. J-frame was fully drawn out. A second box was added, with three frames from the bottom box moved up. Two more J-frames added, one in each box. Mite test, 3:358 (<1%)

June 29: Swapped out solid bottom for a screened bottom. Note how clean the bees keep the inside of the hive. No leftover wax flakes or dropped pollen. Colony had almost entirely built out the J-frames added during last inspection. Good brood pattern and many open cells backfilled with young brood. Very little stored honey, some pollen. Dispatched at least six hive beetles. Fed a jar of 1:1 sugar water.



In the Pollinator Garden - *How do you know who likes what?*



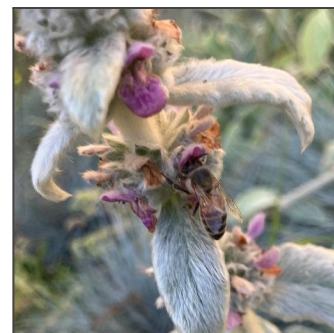
Rob's evaluation in the May newsletter of our current planetary crisis was not optimistic. As for the bees, they are struggling with the sub-lethals and the catastrophic, not to mention the unknowns, such as El Nino. Rob doesn't have the magic flute, but what can we do for the bees? He suggests that we breed some local, genetically adapted super queens; "*You bring your Hank Aaron and I'll bring my Willie Mays*" and we come together to do some selective queen breeding. This is a provocative and bold idea.

And here is another idea, perhaps more approachable, coming from academia and supported with empirical research. Dr. Gordon Frankie, professor emeritus at the UC Berkeley Urban Bee Lab, says, "*If you want to help the bees, plant a garden.*" The Urban Bee Lab is an interesting place because they are not concerned with *Apis mellifera*. Yes, that's right. They want to know what our native California bees are doing in the urban setting, with little concern for the European honeybee. Their field study shows that our native bees can adapt to many urban garden plant species, and even share some of them with our honeybees. This is where we come in, as these same urban gardens are equally, perhaps preferentially, beneficial to *A. mellifera*.

These are two solutions that will definitely help our local bees. Yes, bring on the super-duper honeybee queens, but also, plant a garden! But how do you know what's really happening out there in your garden? Martin recommends that we all take some genuine quiet time to watch the traffic at the hive entrance, as a hive monitoring skill. In addition to watching your hive, try taking a slow walk around your garden to watch the flower traffic. Are the bees sharing? That is, does *A. mellifera* share a particular flower with the natives, and vice versa? You will find that this depends on the specific plant, among other factors. But the general answer is yes, the bees do share many of the popular plants that are found in a pollinator garden. We also know that the natives will do even better when *A. mellifera* is not present, but that is another story. (And if you think about that in the broadest context of cultural extirpation, it is not a new idea.)

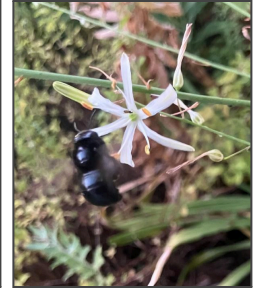
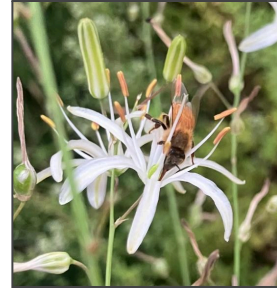
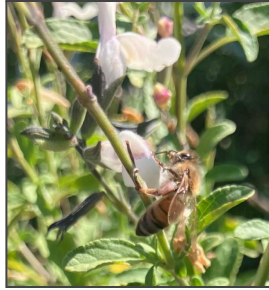
Since NCBA is a honeybee club, it is appropriate to focus on our beloved, yet non-native, *Apis mellifera*, while also keeping in mind the wide range of pollinator species. Here are three very easy non-native garden plants that honeybees love:

- 1) Borage (*Borago officinalis*, below left) Honeybee traffic is constant and borage self-seeds, but is not invasive in our dry climate. After the last meeting, we should now all be growing borage. Let it spread, and ask Rob if you are looking for white Borage.
- 2) Oregano (*Origanum sp.*, below middle) This carefree all-purpose culinary herb is just starting to bloom now and will carry on through the heat as the other spring flowers finish.
- 3) Lamb's-ear (*Stachys byzantina*, below right) Another non-native plant that honeybees love and is even easier to grow. With occasional thinning, this plant is not invasive. Christine has access to loads of lamb's-ears.



But how about taking it to the next level, *optimizing* the bee diversity in your garden? With careful observation, you will find *native* plants that attract both *Apis mellifera* and native bees. This is really where we need to go if we are to build on Dr. Frankie's directive to plant a pollinator garden. Three very easy native plants that do just that:

- 1) *Salvia spp.* (such as *Salvia mellifera*, below far left) Nearly all of the *Salvias* attract a variety of bees, most noticeably the *Xylocopa*, which punctures the corolla for nectar robbing, while *A. mellifera* continues to do business the hard way.
- 2) Soap Plant (*Chlorogalum pomeridianum*) This carefree perennial is blooming now and the flowers bob like a carnival ride under the weight of a single bee, so you can't miss the action.
- 3) Coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*) This plant will fill a big space and the fall bloom is beneficial across all species.



A. mellifera and *Xylocopa sp.* are sharing *Salvia* (above, first 3 pics) and Soap Root flowers (above, last 2 pics)
The *Xylocopa sp.* is nectar robbing the *Salvia* by puncturing the white corolla, while the honeybee is not so clever.

If you haven't yet perfected your "bee eyes", how will you know if this is working? Try planting a native Western Redbud, *Cercis occidentalis*. After the mobs of *Xylocopa* finish swarming the purple blooms like college kids on spring break, pay attention to the leaves. You will know if you have native bees visiting, even if you never see them. In this case, the near perfect discs trimmed out of the Redbud leaf edge means that *Megachile spp.* (Leafcutter bees) are visiting your garden and you are on the right path. (Hey, a new word, say MEG-uh-ky-lee!)



Of course, everyone has their own favorite pollinator plants. The important thing is to simply plant your garden for pollinators. Look around and you will know what is working. If you see *A. mellifera* buzzing to your favorites, try expanding with more native plants. This is really where we all need to go with the sustainable garden. (*Insider note - the CNPS fall native plant sale will be held October 17-18.*) If we build on Rob's idea to distribute local super queens, the complimentary task is to share our favorite bee plants. There was a distribution of rosemary at a meeting last winter, thanks to a generous member. There are now some whisperings of a plant exchange next winter. Stay tuned. Head out to your garden, watch your bees, but watch your plants, too. What could bee better?

- Chris Cole, contributing NCBA member

NCBA T-Shirt Orders

Beautifully printed locally by Grapeleaf Graphics with our logo, 100% cotton, available in S/M/L/XL. Choose from short-sleeved (regular or ladies cut, \$25) or long-sleeved in grey (\$40). Shirts will shrink a bit, so order a size larger if you like a looser fit. Purchase with cash or check (see t-shirt order form linked below).

Send completed [NCBA T-Shirt Order Form](#) to Martin at martinp.ncba@gmail.com or pick up at an upcoming NCBA meeting.



Photo Gallery

A handful of pictures from our June Summer Solstice Potluck...



NCBA Membership - we welcome you!

The Napa County Beekeepers' Association has an active membership program. We welcome beekeepers of any level, as well as folks that just enjoy learning about bees and the greater world of pollinators. Your membership dollars enable us to offer the benefits below, In addition to covering various administrative and website expenses:

- Guest speakers on a range of topics
- Hands-on educational events & workshops
- Various swag discounts & freebies
- Individualized mentoring/consultation
- Monthly meetings and seasonal gatherings
- Monthly newsletter

You may also submit a membership form online at our website: <https://www.beekeepersofnapavalley.org/form>

Note: a digital payment/donation option via Square is now in place on our website.



Napa County Beekeepers' Association

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