



Napa County Beekeepers' Association

Newsletter - April, 2026 issue #26

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! It's official, spring is here, and it would appear that it has brought summer along with it. A VERY warm start to the year, along with below average precipitation, has led to some interesting observations inside hives. Colonies are already starting to slow down on building new wax comb and the local swarm season has so far failed to start in earnest compared to the past several years. Both swarming and wax building rely on a heavy nectar flow and ample pollen to meet the nutritional requirements of a hive to perform these tasks. Without those resources, colonies tend to stay put rather than expand and send out swarms to new locations. Is it too early to say this is the situation this year? Possibly, but it isn't too early to be mindful of what you're seeing, *or not seeing*, inside your hives and using that information as guidance, versus what date the calendar says it is. Only time will tell how the next few months will play out for the bees here in Napa, but I'm betting that a few more twists and turns are still to come.

We would like to thank Emily Bondor for her excellent presentation at our March meeting on the details of Queens, mating, and the importance of also having healthy drones to better ensure the success of the new colony to follow. Thank you also to George Altobell for showing us the hive stands he designed and built for the club hives! These stands are sturdy, simple to build and assemble, and at less than \$40 for all the materials and paint, a bargain compared to what is commercially available. See page 4 for hive stand plans and pictures.

Speaking of club meetings, our new home at the Napa Grange is allowing us to make some changes to our meeting format *and* provide a site for a club hive! Those of you who attended last month saw that we've been fortunate to capture a swarm in the bait hive we placed there earlier in the year. It was a small swarm, possibly the second from the host hive based on the activity we saw at the entrance, but a swarm nonetheless! This brings us to our monthly meeting agenda change-up:

- **At 5:00 pm, just before each monthly meeting, we will inspect the Grange club hive, a hands-on learning opportunity for NCBA members to learn how to manage a hive. This is a wonderful way to expand your bee-working knowledge and skills.**
- **From 6 - 6:30pm, we will hold an informal Q&A session. This time is especially geared towards newer beekeepers to address questions and provide how-to guidance.**
- **From 6:30 - 8pm, we will hold our regular meetings. Note this is a new, later start time.**

As always, we welcome your feedback as we strive to meet the needs of *all* of our club members. See you all at the Grange!
- Martin Podell

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Save the Date - NCBA and Other Happenings

APRIL NCBA CLUB MEETING

When: Monday, April 20 **NOTE NEW MEETING FORMAT & TIMES**

Come for one or all portions of the evening.

5pm: Club Hive (check activity, discuss options for moving hive & how to select a permanent hive location, and prepare the site for the hive - bring weed whacker and small shovels)

6 - 6:30pm: Q&A (casual time to ask questions, get guidance, esp. for newer beekeepers)

6:30 - 8pm: General Club Meeting

Where: Napa Grange, [3275 Hagen Road, Napa](https://www.napa.gov/3275/Hagen-Road-Napa)

What: Spring hive management, including monitoring, hive expansion and splits

CNPS Spring Plant Sale & Wildflower Show

This much anticipated annual sale, run by our local CA Native Plant Society, is *the* time to purchase CA native plants for your gardens and landscapes that do such a spectacular job of attracting bees and other pollinators, are climate-wise *and* beautiful!

When: Saturday April 11, 10am - 3pm (CNPS members pre-sale, 9-10am)

Sunday April 12, 10am - 2pm

Where: Skyline Park, 2201 Imola Ave., Napa (free admission to Skyline Park during sale)



Master Gardeners' Tomato Plant Sale and Education Event

Mark your calendars and stay tuned for more info on the tomato varieties that will be available during this popular spring event, as well as how-to's on growing tomatoes.

When: Saturday, April 11, 9am - until sold out

Where: 1710 Soscol Ave. Napa (next to Central Valley Hardware)

For more info: <https://ucanr.edu/site/uc-master-gardeners-napa-county>



Earth Day Napa 2026

Earth Day brings together organizations from all over the Valley to mark the 56th anniversary of Earth Day. NCBA will be present at the event, letting Napans know about our organization and its mission. **We would love to have you join us to represent NCBA.**

When: Saturday, April 18, 11am - 4pm

Where: Oxbow Commons

For more info: [Earth Day Napa 2026](https://www.earthdaynapa.com/)

To help out at the NCBA booth: email Martin or Christine at napaco.beekeepersassoc@gmail.com



Climate-Friendly Garden Tour

Offered in partnership between the City of Napa Water Division, Napa RCD, and UC Master Gardeners, this self-guided tour of public and private gardens showcases beautiful, climate-smart, and water-wise features.

When: Sunday, May 17, 10am - 4pm

For more info: [2026 Climate-Friendly Garden Tour - Napa County RCD](https://www.napacountyrcd.com/2026-climate-friendly-garden-tour)



Napa Grange Musical Events

Napa Grange hosts many *wonderful* musical events. Coming up soon...

❖ **Natalie Cressman & Ian Faquini at Napa Grange**

Sunday, March 8, 7-10pm

For tickets: [Natalie Cressman & Ian Faquini at Napa Grange](https://www.napagrangemusic.com/natalie-cressman-ian-faquini)



Beeco's Bee Talk



I think we say this every year, but this year is truly unique. After all the preparations, all the bait hive workshops, all the hype and expectations, swarming this year has been at a record low. What a huge dearth-y disappointment. I currently have about 25 bait hives out there and only one I know of is occupied, and even that one wasn't intentionally placed - bees moved into this empty hive at the farm. Remember how in our last newsletter I said something like, *I'll bet we have our first swarm before you even get the newsletter?* My bad... it just goes to show, the one thing we definitely know about bees is that at some point they're going to make a fool of you.

Clearly nothing is for certain, but I suspect that the lack of swarming has something to do with the weather pattern. It is very similar to 2021 when California was in a mega-drought. Bees did exactly what they are doing this year - they hunkered down and stayed put. Sure, some bees did initiate swarming, a few colonies that had a strong propensity to propagate. Christine Kurtz texted me yesterday with Sonoma County's swarm stats for this year: 32 swarms so far this year compared to 85 by this time last year. We don't have any hard data for Napa, but I'd say we even have less based on how much I would normally be bouncing around the valley this time of year. (The pic above is of my first swarm of the year, February 28, much later than last year.)

Is it the end of the bee world? No, but I'd start thinking about a slight pivot in your hive management. For starters, we might start bracing ourselves for less of a honey harvest (if any). Also, pay attention to your bees' ability to build wax - I'm starting to see that slow down, too. Drone culling is imminent and I've even seen some colonies already littered with them in front of the hive. You might re-think or at least have a feeding plan in place if you are deciding to do splits. It takes 8 ounces of honey to make one ounce of wax, so you'd be doing your bees a huge solid to pitch them some 1:1 sugar syrup to help them build up. If you're out in the more rural areas, I suspect you'll be feeding anyway. We'll be deep diving into this more as things unfold, but I'd start bracing myself for another interesting year in beekeeping.

- Rob Keller



It started off as a good year - being stuck in the mud in mid-December is a good thing.



Wax production early in the year was pretty good. Introduction of a frame with starter strip on February 27.



Three days later!



Interestingly, the first swarm and my box turtles waking from hibernation occurred on the same day.



We hustled to set out over 30 bait hives, now mostly sitting empty.



Very few queen cells this year



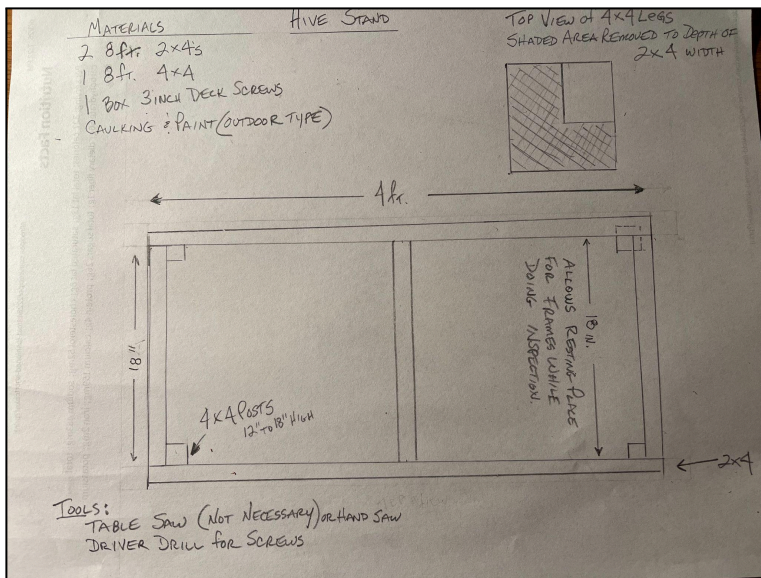
We even had snow on Mt Saint Helena which is pretty unusual.



A bit of an unorthodox way of monitoring wax production, but this piece took the bees one week to build out. In a normal year, this would have been built out in a single day.

Hive Stand

Thank you, George Altobell, for building the hive stand for the NCBA Club Hive, complete with drawing for others to use!



Finished stand - can accommodate hanging frames



Part of 4x4 is cut away so that it nests with outer frame (see drawn plan for details).



Tales from the Club Hive

Regular readers will recall that the St Helena club hive has a mite problem... large number of mites observed on the monitoring board at the beginning of the year when mite loads should be at their lowest! So what to do? We decided to split the hive and introduce new genetics with a Queen cell from proven stock to the split and see what happens as each hive progresses. We had planned to keep the Queen in the original hive and place capped queen cells into the split (new hive), *but* things did not go as planned...

March 11: After a long and thorough search, Rob and Martin were unable to find the queen, so they added capped queen cells to both hives after the split, hedging their bets. (Pic shows queen cell we attached to comb surface.) The idea was that the hive with the original Queen Mother would kill the introduced queen in her cell while the queenless colony would hopefully send out the new virgin Queen to get mated and begin laying. Things did not go as planned...



March 17: First *SPLIT* hive inspection. No new eggs and the two capped queen cells had been opened. No young queens were found: one queen may have emerged, killed the other, and had either been missed in the inspection or was out on a nuptial flight, OR neither survived and the colony was cleaning out the empty Queen cells.

March 21: First *HOST* hive inspection. Fresh young larvae were found and the comb where the capped queen cell had been placed was removed and completely cleaned (see remnants in center of image). So we can conclude that the original Queen was in here and the colony did indeed kill the introduced Queen cell since a newly emerged virgin Queen would not have started laying so soon ... good to know your bee math!



March 22: Next day inspection of the *SPLIT*. Capped brood, but no new eggs or larvae, some drawn out wax on a J-frame and backfilling cells with nectar. *Where is the Queen?!*

March 27: Third *SPLIT* inspection. More drawn comb, less capped brood and bald-facing of pupae at the purple eye stage. Cells continue to be back filled with nectar. Still no Queen.

March 29: From a hive of known good genetics, we cut out a smart-phone sized piece of comb containing eggs, young larvae and capped brood (see 1st pic). This piece was then placed above the frames in the *SPLIT* to allow the bees to draw down new queen cells. Hopefully these girls will utilize the eggs or less-than-three day old larvae to raise a new Queen! Stay tuned...



In the Pollinator Garden

Behold the Pipevine Swallowtail, by Chris Cole (contributing NCBA member)

The 10 day weather forecast is a modern miracle that we should all appreciate, especially as beekeepers. After hearing Emily Bondor of the Santa Cruz Bee Company speak about drone ‘management’ at the March 16 Club meeting, I was very surprised by her early March hive splits. I remember a snowfall one March 23rd! Spring has always been the farmer’s gamble, and as beekeepers, we also play this game. But is there something better, or rather, are there other cues?

The cycle of the seasons waits for no woman, or man. What does the unprecedented 2026 mid-March heat dome mean? If you look around, you will see an eruption of Pipevine Swallowtails, one of our favorite local pollinators. “Eruption” is a term borrowed from the birding world, but it is equally applicable to insects. Isn’t the same eruption happening inside your hive bodies? Does this mean that we are not going to have a late freeze?

The Pipevine Swallowtail on the wing says that spring is here, right now. This butterfly is common in Napa County and easily recognized by its deceptively plain black appearance, which is actually metallic in good light (top pic). However, the underside is colorful if you are fortunate to see them perch and fold their wings (middle pic). The color pattern indicates the gender, if indeed butterflies choose to be gender specific. But one thing for certain, when you see them, spring is on. Pipevine Swallowtails are also very susceptible to road kill, which is how this specimen was found.

This butterfly is special in that you can actually “keep” them, in the same way that you might “keep” your bees. That said, they are truly wild, ‘untreated’ and genetically pure. Pipevine Swallowtail habitat is created by planting its one and only host plant, Dutchman’s Pipe (*Aristolochia californica*) along the shady side of your fence lines. In a few years you will have a beautiful pipevine tangle and the butterflies will come. Their entire life cycle centers on this plant. Soon you can go on an Easter egg hunt for the tiny orange eggs on the underside of the leaves!

Dutchman’s Pipe is very easy to grow, once established. The plants appreciate a bit of extra water during the first year’s summer, before they naturalize. It is very showy in the early spring as the “Dutchman’s Pipe” flowers emerge before the plant’s leaves (see bottom pic). Some believe that it is too early to open your beehives when just the flowers adorn the plant. Shortly after, when the foliage fills in, the butterflies emerge and will start laying their eggs on those leaves. The butterflies could be thought of as your cue to start setting up your spring honey supers and think about swarm trap placement.

Planting Dutchman’s Pipe is one of the easier ways to start or expand your pollinator garden. You can find plants at the Napa CNPS Native Plant sale during the April 11-12 weekend! Once planted, you will ‘bee’ expanding your world view and looking for native bees and other cues that enable you to read the seasons. Will you be able to answer the big question... “*Do native bees share with Apis mellifera, or vice versa?*” Plant a garden and find out.



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 *newly available* long-sleeved in grey (\$30). 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.

NCBA Membership - sign up now!

The Napa County Beekeepers' Association has an active membership program. In addition to covering various administrative and website expenses, membership dollars enable us to offer you:

- 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>



Napa County Beekeepers' Association

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Facebook: [Beekeepers of Napa Valley/Napa County Beekeepers Association | Facebook](#)



CALIFORNIA NATIVE PLANT SALE & WILDFLOWER SHOW

SATURDAY & SUNDAY
APRIL 11-12
2026

SAT: 10 AM TO 3PM

SUN: 10 AM TO 2PM

(Member pre-sale: Sat. 9-10 AM)

OVER 2000 NATIVE PLANTS FOR SALE
100+ drought-tolerant native species

**EXPERTS ON HAND TO ANSWER
YOUR QUESTIONS
AND CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES!!**

**PLUS WILDFLOWER
SHOW**

**Over 100 identified wildflowers
will be on display both days.**

**Docent-led wildflower walks
start at Social Hall,
Saturday 11am & 1pm.**



SKYLINE WILDERNESS PARK - 2201 IMOLA AVE, NAPA
FREE ADMISSION TO SKYLINE PARK DURING SALE

Presented By:

CALIFORNIA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY - NAPA VALLEY CHAPTER

All proceeds benefit the Chapter's educational programs and care of our community native gardens, including Martha Walker California Native Habitat Garden.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT: WWW.NAPAVALLEYCNPS.ORG