

May 12th 2020

A Novice Beekeeper

by Barry McGann

Hi all. Hope everyone is coping in lockdown.

Like a lot of our newer members, Nola and I are also new to beekeeping so I thought I would share with you our apiary setup and experiences to date.

In January 2018, as a Xmas present to myself, I purchased a ticket to a beginner's beekeeping course. It was a full day course run in the picturesque town of Jindivick and covered every aspect of beekeeping. After it I was hooked and so my beekeeping hobby began.

I was told from the start that beekeeping was an addictive hobby. How true. Lucky for me, Nola took up the hobby and is just as addicted. Having those extra pair of hands and eyes when inspecting a hive is invaluable, even better, she doesn't questions my many beekeeping purchases.

Initially we purchased two 10 frame hives from a beekeeper on French Island. The original hive had been split in November 2017 and new Italian queens installed.

In February 2018 we took delivery and transferred the frames into our own Langstroth hives. With good brood and sufficient honey on board, the hives were packed down and left until spring.

One hive is your traditional wood type, the other, an 8/9 frame Langstroth Paradise Bee Box which is made from a high density expanded polystyrene (poly). I was drawn to the poly type because of their good thermal capacity. They are also light and easy to assemble. Cost wise, they're about the same.

We live on 85 acres of land so decided to place the hives in different locations throughout. One is next to our house garden, the other in a paddock next to our cattle yards. Both are surrounded by different types of flora. We were interested to see what effect, if any, this may have on the honey

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Come spring the hives were inspected at the first opportunity. Both had survived. After all my reading/research over winter, I was paranoid of them swarming, so not long after and perhaps a little impatiently, a second brood box was added to both.

Come January and again perhaps a little impatiently, 1 x ideal size supers were also added to both. These babies weren't going anywhere.

In the introduction of his book 'The Australian Beekeeping Manual', Robert Owen writes in part – There is no 'one' or 'right' way of keeping bees and your way of doing things may differ to mine. Differences among beekeepers should be viewed as an opportunity to expand and develop knowledge and skills. Having picked the brains of many beekeepers, I can now relate to that.

That first season, we harvested approximately 36kgs of honey between the two hives before packing them both down as doubles for winter. The honey from both was similar in colour, thickness and taste. The poly hive was a lot more productive and the bees gentler to handle.

We were also lucky to collect a swarm early in our first season. Those bees were placed into a single brood poly hive and located in a paddock surrounded by blackberries and other native flora. Initially they were feed with sugar syrup to help them survive.

After hearing it was good practice to replace swarm queens, I went and purchased a new mated queen. It was early March and getting close to winter lock down. Come time to replace the old queen, Nola couldn't bear to kill her, so our first ever split was performed, albeit premature. The original hive was left in place and the second located on a neighbouring property. Lucky I had purchased all that extra equipment over winter. But would they survive winter. Happily they did. The hives are now doubles and performing great.

This current season has been fantastic for us. Not wanting to boast, we have harvested approximately 123kg of honey from the 4 hives. Honey extracted from the 10 frame wooden hive was slightly less than from that of the 9 frame poly's.

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This season we decided to keep the honey separate when extracting. Although time consuming, the results have been interesting. Taste, colour and thickness were all different.

The first flush of honey collected from our House Hive early summer had us puzzled. This hive has easy access to a wide variety of flora both on and off the farm. After extracting it, I left it in a honey bucket to settle for a day or two. Five days later it had naturally creamed? I must confess that I had forgotten about it. Bottling it was a nightmare. It had turned a creamy white colour, was thick and toffee like. According to Nola it has a smooth texture and a beautiful flavour. A second and third harvest collected late summer and early autumn from the same hive also produced a thick honey which began to crystalize within the first week of bottling.

The Cattle Yard Hive honey was runny but thick. It is light amber in colour with a medium sweetness and strong flavour. This hive also has easy access to a wide variety of flora both on and off the farm.

The Bush Block Hive honey has a nice consistency. It has a mild sweetness and a mellow flavour. It also is light amber in colour. Interestingly, this hive was the last to get active after winter due to a later flush of flowers close by. This hive has access to native flora only.

The Neighbour Hive honey is thin, medium to dark amber in colour and very sweet and floral in flavour. This hive is close to old farm fruit trees and well established gardens nearby.

Very interesting results with regards to this seasons harvest. We would be interested to know why the honey from the House Hive creamed the way it did. Any ideas?

Our hives have now been packed down for winter with more than adequate honey stores on board. We have enjoyed the experience of beekeeping and look forward to what the next seasons bring.

See you on the other side of lock down.

Barry