



BEES ARE BENEFICIAL

Of the many tiny animals that share the planet with us, there are only a few insects that people generally accept as beneficial – most are regarded as disgusting or frightful. Insects often garner a bad reputation because of their unfamiliar appearance and habits.

Honey bees are, perhaps, the insects with the best public image. We see them as industrious (“busy as a bee”) and we appreciate their main product, honey, as setting the standard for all that is ecstatically wonderful and sweet. Honey is only possible because thousands of bees harvest the nectar from flowers converting the sugary liquid to delicious honey. And honey bees pollinate a vast variety of food crops.

I LOVE YOU, HONEY

Health food enthusiasts see honey as an alternative to sugar. Many home remedy proponents extol the use of honey as a cure for various ailments. We even call our loved ones “Honey” as a term of endearment. The Bible is full of positive references to honey, such as “the land of milk and honey.” The Koran and many ancient as well as modern works refer to bees and honey. Prehistoric cave drawings show people harvesting honey from wild bee colonies and ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics depict early beekeeping activities.

With the good and sweet there is a down side – people get stung sometimes. Even Winnie the Pooh found that bees could get a little nasty when disturbed. But, in general, bees and their honey have a long and well-established history of acceptance and respect.

BEES ARE IMPORTANT POLLINATORS

While honey is nice, the honey bee’s real importance lies in its performance as a pollinator. The value of just the almonds produced in California each year with the help of honey bees is more than twice the value of all the honey produced in the United States in any given year. In MAAREC, apple and blueberry, watermelon, cantaloupe, cucumber and many other crops benefit from bee pollination. More than 100 agricultural crops in the United States are pollinated by bees. About a third of the food Americans eat comes directly from the pollination honey bees perform.

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KILLER BEES

Some of the tales told about this bee are incredible. The Africanized honey bee (AHB) or killer bee as it is sometimes called, is said to attack for no good reason. It is a bee that is difficult to handle for beekeepers who want to move colonies around to pollinate various crops. Stories suggest that the AHB often invades the unmanaged colonies of “normal” bees and takes them over in a sort of insect blitzkrieg.

The AHB or killer bee has been depicted in science fiction movies like “The Swarm,” “The Savage Bees” and in the Fox TV movie “Deadly Invasion: the Killer Bee Nightmare,” threatening our lives, our property, and our whole way of life. There is no question this bee is more defensive (aggressive) in defending its home and beekeepers and others have gotten stung multiple times in accidents. Regardless of myths to the contrary, Africanized honey bees do not fly out in angry swarms to randomly attack unlucky victims.

MAAREC, the Mid-Atlantic Apiculture Research and Extension Consortium, is an official activity of five land grant universities and the U. S. Department of Agriculture. The following are cooperating members:

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University of Maryland
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