

Backyard Bee Buzz

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
May 2016

State legislation helps Miami-Dade beekeeping to thrive



ees are no longer considered “pets” by municipalities in Florida.

Before 2012, local governments often banned backyard beekeeping, considering 40,000 bees in a managed hive as 40,000 pets, which exceeded residential pet limit codes.

But since 2012, when the Beekeepers Protection Act was signed into law, individual county and municipal regulations regarding residential beekeeping in Florida are now superseded by state laws that expand the Florida Right to Farm Act to include activities of managed honey bee colonies, also known as apiaries.

According to the Florida Department of Agriculture, all beekeepers in the state now can have managed honey bee colonies on private non-agricultural land, with certain restrictions: Properties must be fenced, and if colonies are within 15 feet of the property line, a flyway barrier must be installed. All beekeepers and colonies must be registered with the state and inspected annually.

There are limitations to colony density. Three colonies are allowed per quarter-acre or less, six colonies on more than a quarter-acre but less than a half-acre, and so on.

David Westervelt, assistant chief of Florida’s Bureau of Plant and Apiary Inspection, tells the *BT*

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that the recent unification of apiary regulations under state law has resulted in a 400 percent increase in registered hobbyist beekeepers in Miami-Dade. He points out there are currently 152 registered beekeepers in Miami-Dade. Of these, 97 are considered hobbyist beekeepers; 44 are “side-liners” who make extra income on the side from honey harvests or bee rentals; the remainder are large commercial bee farmers.

The huge increase in the number of managed European honey bee hives (14,137 in Miami-Dade alone) is helping to keep more aggressive Africanized cousins in check, explains Westervelt, who began beekeeping when he was six years old, inheriting a family tradition that is traced back to his great-grandfather and continues today with his son and grandson.

Westervelt explains why it’s important to protect beekeeping in Miami-Dade. “Residential beekeepers are essential for pollination of backyard gardens in South Florida,” he says. “Commercial beekeepers [who travel the country, renting hives to large farms] won’t bring their hives into small gardens, but for just a few dollars, backyard hobbyists will take two or three of their hives there to do the job.”

Westervelt adds, “The state has gone to battle for apiarists in urban areas like Miami-Dade, but now the state statute that provides a uniform bee code has done away with municipal legal fights. We’re just now catching up with the rest of the world. For years European countries like Germany have allowed beekeeping in backyards. It’s normal there.”

Statewide, statistics also show an uptick of beekeepers, with 4032 now registered in Florida. Inspection records show the actual number of managed colonies in the state has dropped from 512,000 to 462,231, from one beekeeper’s loss of many hives due to Varroa mites.

Colony Collapse Disorder, or CCD, is a general term for sudden hive death caused by disease, pesticides, stress, loss of natural foraging grounds, and, in particular, invasive pests.

The common practice of cross-country trucking of colonies for agricultural mass pollination is extremely stressful on bees. USDA surveys show an average of 30 percent of U.S. colonies are lost each year owing to CCD.

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Starting in 1919, annual state inspections of registered apiaries have helped ensure the health of hives. Florida is divided into 15 inspection districts; one inspector covers Broward, Miami-Dade, and Monroe counties. Hive location approval is up to inspectors, who look for signs of disease or parasites among hive occupants, which include one queen, hundreds of male drones, and anywhere from 20,000 to 80,000 female worker bees.

According to Westervelt, April and May are when everyone gets bees in Florida. He expects 150 to 200 more beekeepers to register with the state this spring. “A beekeeper,” he says, “doesn’t necessarily have to own property on which the colonies are located, but he or she still must be in compliance with state statutes.”

Support groups exist to help Florida apiarists of all levels of expertise. State groups include the Florida State Beekeepers Association and the Florida Backyard Beekeepers Association.

The University of Florida’s Entomology and Nematology Department has a Honey Bee Research and Extension Lab as a source of bee knowledge and is registering beekeepers for South Florida Bee College’s intensive classes to be held August 12-13.

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