

Teacher, Mentor or Babysitter? By Carol Cottrill

Winter: our bees are hunkered down in their hives and we are all hoping that the preparations we made last fall will help them get through the winter. As we wait for spring and the emergence of all those new worker bees there will be another crop of “new-bees” as emerging well. The Chapter Bee Schools, Extension Courses and other beekeeping classes are up and running. Soon a lot of these new beekeepers will be painting hives, making up frames and planning to install that nuc or package of bees.

Do you remember the first time you had to actually do something with a whole bunch of living, moving, flying (stinging) honey bees? Suddenly all the class lectures, pictures and videos are supposed to have prepared you for getting this moving mass of fuzzy insects into a box without damaging the queen. Wouldn't it be nice to have the calming influence of someone who has actually done this operation before?

One of the terrific qualities of beekeepers is their willingness to share information and skills to anyone who is seriously interested in learning to keep bees, their willingness to teach or mentor.

Teacher: somebody who imparts knowledge or skill to somebody by instruction or example.

Mentor: somebody, usually older and more experienced, who advises and guides a younger, less experienced person; a wise and trusted counselor or teacher; an influential senior sponsor or supporter.

Your club arranges a speaker and the night of that presentation a swarm of eager beekeepers descends on the location that the loyal club scouts have found for the lecture. The speaker brings a Power Point presentation, some handouts and several pieces of equipment to demonstrate the topic. You can tell that the speaker put a lot of time and effort in their presentation! Unfortunately new beekeeper Sadie Marie is not in attendance. But that's okay as the topic presented will be reinforced at the Open Hive scheduled for next Saturday.

Open Hive Day arrives, a perfect day to work in the bee yard and lots of bright, eager new-bees gather around the hives with their questions as the demonstration proceeds. After the hives are all closed up the group retires for a picnic lunch and more questions, answers and general beekeeping discussions. Once again Sadie Marie is nowhere to be found. Later that night the telephone rings: it is Sadie Marie who has a bunch of questions on the very topic that was covered by both the speaker and at the open hive.

Billy Bob really wanted to have honey bees and now has his very first hive. He did attend a bee school and made it to all the classes, but he was always too busy to go to any of the open hives and never got around to joining a club. Now he needs some help with his hive and calls a local beekeeper to “come over and take a look” at what is going on. Beekeeper Serious Sam arrives and finds that Billy Bob hasn't even looked at his hive since Sam helped him install the nuc a month ago. The feeder pail is empty, the foundation hasn't been drawn out and the girls are not in good shape. Billy Bob stands back and asks Sam to “fix” his hive.

If you have ever organized a meeting, taught a bee school, held an open hive or mentored a new-bee these scenarios could sound all too familiar. So what *should* be expected of a mentor? A mentor agrees to be available to help, but the time commitment should be reasonable. Their availability is not 24/7, on short notice at whatever time fits the new-bee's schedule. Yes emergencies happen, but not everything is an emergency. Mentors do have a life outside of beekeeping – and they have hives of their own to tend to. Don't expect them to drop everything to come to help you; be reasonable in your requests for assistance. You could also ask to go to your mentor's bee yard to observe– or maybe even to help – and do show up for club meetings and open hives!

The mentor's purpose is not to do your hive inspections, feed and medicate your bees, take off your supers or do other routine beekeeping operations. Your mentor will watch as you perform the various manipulations and then can offer instructions, encouragement or corrections as needed. If you are fortunate enough to have the help of a mentor make sure you are prepared for their visit. Have all supplies and equipment ready to go and know what you plan to accomplish during the visit to your bees.

The new-bee gains a lot from working with a mentor, but there are also benefits to being a mentor. As your new-bee asks questions you may have to research some of the answers; this will increase your knowledge of beekeeping. Demonstrating procedures and explaining what you are doing, and why, also increases your beekeeping skills. If you are an experienced beekeeper consider being a mentor to a new-bee; if you are a new-bee be considerate of your mentor – they are a very valuable resource!