

Ask ten people why they keep bees and you'll get fifteen different answers. Only a very small percentage of people do it as a livelihood or to



supplement the income from their day job. Most beekeepers are small-time backyard hobbyists. Some get started because they want pollination for their own little garden. Others enjoy producing unique honey to share with family and friends. There are beekeepers that get satisfaction from engaging in a bit of self-sufficiency.

Many like the idea that they are contributing to the environmental health of their local area.

The mindset and motives that cause someone to join the fellowship of beekeepers can sometimes conflict with the realities of maintaining a healthy colony of our European honey bees, *apis mellifera*. This can lead to frustration and failure. For example, if someone wants to put a box of honey bees in their backyard and never mess with them again (hands-off beekeeping), their colony will become infested with virus-spreading parasites and will dwindle and die. It may linger on as long as two or three years but the inevitable result will be failure.

Does this mean that hands-off hobbyists are doomed? Absolutely not! The issue isn't the motives of the beekeeper; it is the bee they are trying to keep. *Apis mellifera*, the popular European honey bee, just isn't equipped to meet everyone's needs. If you want a dog to run with you on marathons, do you get a Greyhound or a British Bulldog? If you want a lap dog to keep you warm at night, do you buy a shaggy Pomeranian or a Great Dane? European honey bees aren't the only bee that can be kept in your backyard. They are just the ones that get the most attention.

Just as you should match your lifestyle and goals with the right breed of dog, you should also investigate different species of bees that can easily be kept. You may find one that exactly matches your needs. For example, many people:

1. want pollination for their garden
2. want to support the environmental health of their local area
3. aren't interested in a honey crop
4. don't want to bother with expensive equipment
5. don't want the burden of controlling parasites
6. don't want to be concerned with swarm prevention
7. don't want to be stung!

European honey bees meet the first two of these goals but are very poorly matched for the last five.

However mason bees, *osmia lignaria*, are perfectly aligned with all seven of these criteria!

1. It has been said that one mason bee does the pollination work of 120 European honey bees. They work in a small radius around their nests (a few hundred feet rather than several miles) so their effort is focused on the owner's garden.
2. Unlike European honey bees, mason bees are a native species. This fact has a philosophical appeal to many people.
3. Mason bees don't make honey.
4. Their homes can be as simple as wooden blocks with holes drilled in them, or a bundle of bamboo-like reeds. You can buy them or easily make them yourself.
5. Mason bee biology is different from honey bees so they don't succumb to the parasites that infest honey bees.
6. They are solitary bees so they don't swarm. In addition, mason bees are only active for a few months of the year so they don't require year-round care.
7. Since mason bees don't protect their nest, they don't normally sting.

Mason bees aren't the only "alternative" bees that can be kept. For example, bumble bees are kept commercially to pollinate blueberries and tomatoes. There are many other fit-for-purpose bees as well. The key is to align your goals, outlook and expectations with the right species of bee. One place to begin learning about the possibilities is the Pollinator Conservation page at <http://growingsmallfarms.ces.ncsu.edu/>.

It may seem odd that a Master Beekeeper is suggesting something other than honey bees. Don't misunderstand: European honey bees are very well aligned with my personal goals and I accept the requirements it takes to keep them healthy and productive. But I see many people who don't share my perspective and after a year or two of frustration, end up with empty boxes and a sense of failure. If they can participate in the joyful pleasures of beekeeping without frustration by keeping a different bee, shouldn't the world be a happier place? Add that to my list of goals!

*Randall Austin is a NC Master Beekeeper who keeps a few honey bee hives in northern Orange County. He can be reached at [s.randall.austin@gmail.com](mailto:s.randall.austin@gmail.com).*

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