

As a hobby, beekeeping can easily pay for itself through honey sales. Do you want to wring a few more dollars from it, and have some fun at the same time? Rent your hives out for pollination! It isn't difficult, it provides a much-needed, much-appreciated service and it pays. In addition, moving just a few miles can sometimes add a different nuance to the taste of your honey or even result in a totally different variety.



Who needs it?

Orange County is ranked 87th of North Carolina's 100 counties in the value of our vegetable, fruit, nuts and berries production --- these are the crops that are known for requiring pollination. Durham County is ranked 92nd. Maybe a more optimistic way to look at it, "Orange County produces more vegetables, fruit, nuts and berries than 13 other counties! Wow!" While this suggests that the large commercial market may be limited, we all know that gardening and niche agriculture is hot stuff around here. Small-time producers and backyard growers are the ones least likely to have access to professional beekeepers. So there are opportunities for hobbyists interested in pollinating fruits and vegetables.

Connecting with clients

How do you find someone who needs your bees? The most obvious method is word of mouth. If you aren't shy about the fact that you keep bees, savvy friends and friends-of-friends will line up at your door. The trick is to make sure that they are not only aware of the importance of pollination, but also the value of pollination.

The typical charge for commercial pollination in North Carolina is around \$50 per colony per crop, with a minimum charge to make the effort worthwhile. When the bloom is completed for one crop (e.g. blueberries), the hives are moved to the next crop (e.g. cucumbers). If you are pollinating your friend's garden, use this value as a benchmark to come to a mutually beneficial arrangement. Maybe you are happy to pollinate for a share of the produce instead of cash. If so, make sure it is an appropriately large share. And never get conned into giving up part of your honey crop for the "privilege" of putting your bees on someone's land. That is exactly the same sort of arrangement that Tom Sawyer made with the kids who were given the "privilege" of whitewashing Aunt Polly's fence.

Another reliable way of connecting with growers is to let the president of your county bee association know that your bees are available for rent. County associations are often contacted by small-time producers who need a few hives. This is how I came to pollinate a small pick-your-own strawberry farm several years ago. I was paid in both cash and strawberries, an unbeatable arrangement! And I got a nice strawberry-flavored honey in the bargain.

The NC Department of Agriculture has yet another means of connecting growers with

beekeepers. Their [Bee Linked website](#) allows people to list what they need in terms of pollination, or what they offer in the way of bees, whether a single hive or a thousand.

It is important to discuss contingencies with the client to ensure there are no unpleasant surprises.

- Where is the closest source of water? A strong hive on a hot day needs as much water as a dog. For them, a neighbor's swimming pool is a gift from heaven! Provide a better source of water if the bees' choice isn't going to be appropriate, and do so before the bees choose. Who will ensure the supply is constant?
- What should the client do if the hive is knocked over, swarms, becomes aggressive or shows no sign of life?
- What should they do if they want to mow, roto-till, play, etc. in close proximity to the hives?
- What pesticides, if any, do they or their neighbors use, and when do they use them? What are the bee-related warnings for those pesticides? How will the client work with you to reduce pesticide risks?
- When will you drop off the bees? Professionals wait until about half of the target crop has begun to bloom so the bees will immediately begin foraging on it. If they are put in place too early, they may fixate on a more productive source and ignore the target crop.
- When will you pick them up?

There are lots of other questions that will come to mind. The important thing is that you

communicate with the client, without leaving anything unsaid. Misunderstandings are never good. If you aren't sure about something, say so. And as the folks on TV's "People's Court" teach us every afternoon, it's always best to get key agreements in writing.

How to do it

Moving hives is easy if you have a few simple tools.

1. First you'll need a pick-up truck or similar conveyance. The idea is for the bees to be on the outside, you on the inside, as you travel merrily down the road.
2. You'll also need a second pair of strong arms. These can be those of a devoted spouse; loving, large-type child or a really good friend.
3. Long, strong tie-down straps are a must. The ratchet type is best.
4. You'll need something to seal the hive entrance. Professionals often use special-purpose moving screens, a little screen-covered frame that fits in front of the entrance, but rolled-up window screen works perfectly fine. If you have screened bottom boards and so don't need to worry about suffocation, you can use a towel. Number 8 wire mesh works too. You get the idea: anything that prevents the bees from leaking out without suffocating them will do nicely.
5. Duct tape has a million uses, 53 of which involve moving bees. For example, it is great for temporarily sealing leaky boxes.
6. Professionals use forklifts, but I use my kids' large Radio Flyer wagon to trundle hives from the truck to the put-down

site when I cannot drive right up to it. Something like this may not be needed, but plan ahead.

Move hives at night so nearly all of the foragers will be home. If you have a notched cover, slide the outer cover so the entrance is in the closed position. Use a tie-down strap to bind the hive parts together as tightly as possible. While avoiding tipping, slanting and dropping, hoist the hive onto the conveyance (this is a two-person job). Transport to the new location and repeat the process in reverse.

Delivering a medium-sized colony on a cool March evening is a whole lot easier than retrieving a honey-laden, extremely strong colony on a warm summer night. Prepare for the unexpected (if that is semantically possible). For example, on a warm night with a strong hive, there will be lots of bees hanging out on the bottom board when you go to pick them up. What will you do? What if your helper twists the stack of supers as you are setting them on the truck, releasing thousands of highly irritated bees? Adjust, adapt and improvise! It makes you wonder what ordinary people do for fun, doesn't it?

See what works for you

Always remember that there are many ways to skin a cat. I cannot tell you the best or right methods, only what has worked for me. I shudder to think that people do exactly what I say I do, because nobody else has the precise combination of my goals, my location, my history, my perspective and my specific bees. I hope you can learn from my experiences and mistakes, or at least be amused by them, and then tailor your beekeeping style to suit your

unique situation. Above all, try new things, have fun and turn mistakes into learnings!

Photo: "Wagon load of bees", from Fifty Years Among the Bees, by C.C. Miller, 1911.



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