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Hive Lights

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Honey combing

Ron Miksha

There are two things that might make beekeeping more enjoyable — honeybees that don't sting and bee equipment that is weightless. And before the beekeeping genie goes back

into his smoker, I should make a third wish — wouldn't it also be nice to be able to make a decent living from beekeeping?

For better or worse, we're pretty well stuck with the global economy the way it is, so honey prices will be in the range that the average Argentine, Ukrainian, or Chinese beekeeper can make the same sort of wage as the average Canadian beekeeper. And bees without stingers are probably still a few years away — bio-engineers are not likely to genetically design a stingless bee until there is some money to be made selling this creation to beekeepers. And beekeepers won't have money for new innovations until honey prices go up.

But weightless bee equipment is almost a reality. My friend, the prairie beekeeper Harms Kluehoff, has it figured out already. He uses full-depth hive bodies for honey supers. To most of us, these boxes can easily weigh eighty pounds. But to him, they are weightless. "I hire the Gillespie twins. Six-three, two hundred pound lads — they do all my lifting." You probably don't have a set of Gillespies in your neighbourhood, so maybe you'd appreciate light-weight bee equipment.

I started to think about my bee boxes these past few weeks because the bee work is over and I have a bit of time. My bees are wrapped. Most of my honey has been sold at ten dollars a pound on the Internet. There's not a lot to do, except sit

back and think about bee equipment. This is the time of the year when most of us northern latitude beekeepers think too much about everything. The worst of winter is over, days are becoming a little longer, and the occasional bright sunny afternoon melts a bit of ice and makes us believe spring in Canada is possible. So we figure we will need boxes for bees. We may paint and clean the old ones. Renail hive bodies. Recycle thick-celled black brood combs. If the 6-49 pays off, we may even think about buying some new equipment. Maybe something light-weight.

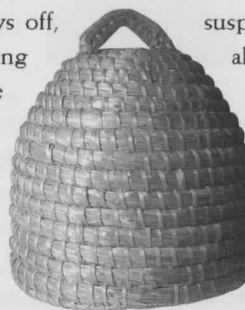
My cousins in Europe keep their bees in skeps. The skep is light-weight. And skep beekeeping has its charms. If Martha Stewart weren't so practical, she'd probably keep her seven colonies in skeps. They'd have bright blue and pink ribbons and bows wrapped around them.

According to my European cousins, skep beekeeping is easy. Wintering is usually successful because the straw walls keep the colony warm and dry. Swarm management is simple because skeppers want swarms. Bees in skeps fill the cavity with honey, then they swarm. Swarms are caught directly in the cup-shaped skeps. This keeps the keeper in the bee business. In the fall, each skep is hefted. The really

heavy ones are harvested — bees killed; honey sold. The really light ones aren't likely to make winter, so they are also harvested. The middle weight group of skeps is left alone. Hopefully, they will swarm the following spring and the swarms will replenish the emptied skeps. That's the way bees have been kept in most of Europe for over a thousand years.

We don't skep because we can make more honey with moveable frame hives. And hives with frames make it possible for bee inspectors to inspect bees. This makes modern hives legal; skeps, hollow logs, nail kegs, and Volkswagen Beetles are not legal bee hives.

Though we think it is modern, our beekeeping equipment hasn't changed much in the past hundred fifty years. Reverend Langstroth popularized the modern hive with its removeable combs, but this idea had been around a long time. Langstroth improved it, standardized it. But the ancient Greeks used hives with top-bar frames twenty centuries ago. Combs were suspended from flat wooden bars, allowing scientists like Aristotle to pull apart his hives and examine the bees at work. Though the top-bar hive has been used continuously in some parts of southern Europe ever since, it is not as versatile nor as well adapted to various climates as Langstroth's hive.



Skeps; they're a good thing. So, our hive is not really modern anymore; nor is it

likely the best we can do for our bees. The hive is dove-tailed, glued, and hammered together from expensive planks. Treated and painted, it may still rot. It has an awkward size and requires Gillespie twins to move it around. As a result of its many failings, experimental hives have been attempted — almost all of them better than the standard bee hive most of us use. But it isn't easy getting a hundred thousand North American beekeepers to give up their two million hives and replace them with a better box.

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This issue of HiveLights has a little article about something called the Todorov hive. Read it. This new hive concept will probably never revolutionize bee culture, but it likely has its favourable traits. The developer threw away the rectangular box design and tried to model the bee hive after a bee's nest. It combines some traits of the skep and some aspects of modular honey box units — things we call supers.

I doubt I will ever own a Todorov hive. My bold step out into the world of innovation happened a few years ago when I replaced all my standard honey supers with little — light weight! — comb honey supers. But even my round-section comb honey supers are not new and novel. Dr. W. Z. Zbikowski invented one of the first — over fifty years ago. He called his product the Cobana super. It took advantage of a new technological innovation (plastic) and introduced rigid plastic frames and round comb sections. Others build on the concept, added new ideas, probably made a better product.

Even for those of us with bad backs, weak legs, and flat feet, the round section supers can be handled without a set of Gillespies. This is certainly a prime reason to consider honey combing if you are considering beekeeping in 2001 at all.

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Cette ruche combine certains aspects des ruches de paille et certains traits des ruches modulaires modernes - ce que nous appelons des hausses.

Je doute de posséder un jour une ruche Todorov. Mon pas en avant le plus audacieux dans le monde de l'innovation s'est produit il y a quelques années, quand j'ai remplacé toutes mes hausses à miel standards par des petites — et légères! — hausses à miel en rayon. Je dois dire que même mes hausses à rayons ronds ne sont pas nouvelles et originales. Le Docteur W. Z. Zbikowski en a inventé un prototype il y a plus de cinquante ans. Il a appelé son produit la hausse Cobana. Il a tiré profit d'une innovation technologique de l'époque, le plastique, et a introduit les cadres de plastique rigide et les sections rondes de rayon. Par la suite, d'autres inventeurs ont amélioré le concept en ajoutant de nouveaux détails, et ont probablement créé un meilleur produit.

Même pour ceux parmi nous qui souffrent de mal de dos, de jambes faibles et de pieds plats, les hausses de rayons ronds peuvent être manipulées sans jumeaux Gillespie. C'est certainement une raison majeure de songer à produire du miel en rayon si vous envisagez de faire de l'apiculture en l'an 2001.

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