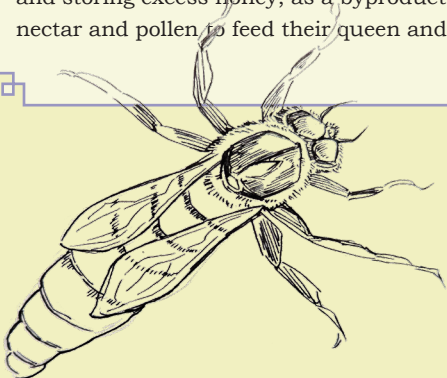


Honey Communities



On Earth, there are over 20,000 known species of bee, found on every land mass except Antarctica. But when you think of a bee, you probably imagine the honey bee. These famous honey bees, believed to originate from Africa or Asia, are most well-known for their production and storage of honey, in addition to their construction of beeswax hives to house their highly social queen-led colonies; and their ability to sting. These are qualities that are not shared by all other bees! In fact, there are only eight recognized species of honey bee: most bee species do not produce and store honey, nor do they live in a highly social colony structure, nor do they necessarily even have the ability to sting. They come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, some developing unique features, adapting them to more effectively feed (and more effectively pollinate) the flowers in their ecosystems.

So what do bees have in common? One quality they share is their role as pollinators in their ecosystems— as they feed on nectar and pollen, they also end up carrying pollen from one flower to another, serving as a critical conduit in plant reproduction. Honey bees have the additional quality of producing and storing excess honey, as a byproduct of collecting nectar and pollen to feed their queen and her larvae.



Soul Soleil Farms is an apiary and lavender farm based out of Museville, Virginia. Dave and Leigh Thornton run the farm, planting, tending, and harvesting lavender. They also beekeep, working together to harvest honey. Many Saturdays, they can be found at the Farmers Market at IX Park in Charlottesville, sharing their lavender and honey products with the community. Other times, they can be found at various community events, sharing and educating others about beekeeping. They graciously took time to speak with us across two weekends; the first at IX Market, and the second at an Earth Day event at Panorama Natural Burial in Earlysville, VA.

What follows are excerpts from our two Saturday conversations with Dave, where we learned more about honey bee social organization, honey production, and the inter-species relationships— between flowers, bees, and the communities of Central Virginia— they have made through beekeeping.



Us: *How did you decide to farm lavender?*

Dave: Leigh ended up visiting a lavender farm outside of Harrisonburg in 2018.... The owner shared some of her experiences, and we ended up attending a lavender conference, a national lavender conference for a week to learn more about the crop and what you can do with it.

Us: *So you started with lavender and then added bees?*

Dave: The first hives we got were in 2019. Leigh thought of it, since you see bees out, butterflies, and other pollinators in the lavender. We ended up purchasing two small hives, or “nucs”, from a local keeper. Nucs have five frames. We purchased two of those and that’s how we started with the bees.



Nucleus hives, or “nucs” (pronounced “nukes”), are smaller colonies that have the capability to grow into a full colony. This usually takes about a month.

Honey-Apricot Cookies

Ingredients:

- 1 stick of butter
- 240g flour
- 1g cinnamon
- 1g nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1g kosher salt
- 40g dark brown sugar
- 40g granulated sugar
- 105g honey
- 1 egg
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 12 dried apricots, chopped
- turbinado sugar



TIP: When you start to see golden flecks in the butter, remove the saucepan from heat. The milkfats will continue to cook slightly in the hot butter, removing it from the heat prevents them from burning.

Step 1: Brown the butter

1. In a saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat, stirring constantly until the milk fats just start to take on a darker color. Allow to cool as you begin to make the dough.

Step 2: Forming the dough

1. In a medium bowl, mix together the flour, cinnamon, nutmeg, baking soda, cornstarch, and salt.
2. In a large bowl, beat together the browned butter, brown sugar, and granulated sugar. Once creamy, add the egg, honey, vanilla extract, and chopped dried apricots and mix until just combined.
3. Add the dry ingredients to the wet mixture, and mix until just combined.
4. Cover the bowl of cookie dough and chill in the fridge for at least 30 minutes.

TIP: If your oven takes a little while to preheat, you can start some time while the dough is chilling.

Step 3: Baking the cookies

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F, and line two baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. Once the dough has chilled, roll into balls, about 1-2 tablespoons in size, depending on your preference. Pour some turbinado sugar into a bowl. Roll dough balls in bowl to coat.
3. Place the cookie dough balls on the prepared baking sheets, leaving some space between the cookies, as they will spread a little. Bake at 350°F for 10-12 minutes.
4. Allow cookies to cool, then enjoy!



On lavender farming and beekeeping...

The Thorntons look at their farm holistically, as an assemblage of species, between the flowers, their pollinators, and them as caretakers. The honey is proof that the bees are doing well.

Dave described how selling honey and lavender forms connections between them and the local food-making community. For example, Leigh works with a chocolatier who uses their honey and lavender to make chocolates. She's also connected with local apothecaries, florists, and even a creamery (for lavender ice cream!). He also brought up education. He takes his traveling hive to elementary schools and does events for the community.

On starting the farm...

Dave shared some of his own personal story as well. Shortly after the Thorntons moved back to Charlottesville, they started growing lavender. They now grow multiple crops, and have become friends with other farmers, whom they barter and exchange goods with. Dave said that before this, he didn't garden in the past, but now, he's outside everyday, keeping active, learning from the species he shares the outdoors with. He said that these connections have strengthened them both physically and spiritually.



On which flowers the honey bees like...

According to Dave, the bees do very well with the native flora around this area. He showed us pictures on his phone of the bees around surrounding flowers. He said that you can see what flowers the bees pollinate by seeing what pollen they bring back, and that the bees tend to gravitate to trees, rather than individual flowers. Flowering trees have flowers in higher concentrations, so bees can more efficiently gather pollen on each journey.

On the origins of honey bees in the United States...

Dave explained that honey bees are not native to the United States. Rather, they were brought over by European settlers.

On drones and workers...

Dave explained that drone bees (males) are larger than the worker bees (females). The queen is largest of them all. There is a difference in shape between the drones and the queen, and you can also spot her by the behavior of the bees around her. The closest female bees, or nurse bees, tend to face her.

