

Nonprofit Bees in the D hit the roof to reverse decline in honey bee population

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(Photo: Rodney Coleman-Robinson, Special to the Detroit Free Press)

The buzz around metro Detroit is that there are likely few people who know and share more about the importance of bees than Brian Peterson. And he practices what he preaches.

“A decade ago the die-off rate for bees in Michigan during the winter was 19%. Last year it was 53%, and two years ago it was 72%,” said Peterson, founder of the Detroit-based nonprofit Bees in the D. With the declining bee population nationwide, “it is important now more than ever to educate about honey bees and their conservation.”

Pesticides are the main reason for the weakening bee population, Peterson said.

So on any given day, you can find Peterson working on rooftops in metro Detroit caring for bees and harvesting honey.

Bees in the D is maintaining 29 beehives across metro Detroit.

The bees from the hives that Bees in the D helps maintain go across urban gardens and wildflowers throughout the city and help assist in the pollination of plants, according to Peterson. He said bees help produce one-third of food consumed nationwide. He said he hopes that his projects will also help turn around the declining bee population in metro Detroit.

Some of the beehives, including two on top of Detroit City Distillery in Eastern Market, benefit the hives' hosts. Peterson said he partnered with distillery owner J.P. Jerome because Peterson prefers to work with local companies and make use of essentially wasted rooftop space.

Though the space may be wasted, the harvest is not. Detroit City Distillery incorporates the honey produced by the 40,000 bees on its roof in some of its drinks.

"We try to buy all our products as local as possible, and it really can't get more local than our own roof," said Jerome.

But the honey is not just for drinks.

"Bees are responsible for about one-third of the food we eat. Their declining population is potentially harming the food industry," Peterson said.

Some of that food can be found in Cobo Center. Cobo is Bees in the D's newest site. The four hives on Cobo's Living Roof can be seen from Cobo's observation deck. Cobo Center uses the harvested honey in its kitchen, along with the herbs that are grown on the Living Roof.

"Our living green roof is the perfect location for fostering honeybee hives, so partnering with Bees in the D was a natural fit," said Claude Molinari, general manager of Cobo Center. "With 10,000 square feet of living green roof and organic herb gardens already growing in the old Cobo heliport location, the addition of honeybees to the ecosystem is designed to improve the health and growth of all our sustainable installations."

Some of the other hive sites include the rooftop of Bon Bon Bon in Hamtramck and Detroit Abloom, near the Detroit River Walk, among other locations.

Recently Peterson maintained the hives at Bon Bon Bon. There he checked to make sure the hive was healthy and had a queen bee.

Peterson has been interested in bees ever since attending a two-week course at the Central Michigan University biological center with Dr. Diane Tracey about eight years ago. He then became her apprentice and helped her manage the apiary at Oakland University. Peterson said working so closely with bees made him catch the bug, and he began getting hives at his own house. He said about a year ago he decided he wanted to use his knowledge and love for bees to start his own nonprofit, which has been expanding since the day he founded it.

Aside from managing operations for Bees in the D, Peterson also teaches fifth grade in Rochester Hills and a course at OU called Science for Elementary Teachers.

Working with tens of thousands of bees comes with some hazards. Beside walking on rooftops, there's the obvious possibility of being attacked by bees.

Peterson said he has been stung between 10 and 12 times in his life, but blames each occurrence on himself.

"Keep in mind that's eight years of beekeeping. I don't worry about stings, I don't react much and it doesn't bother me too much. Every time I got stung it was my fault. I either did not light the smoker to calm (the bees) down, accidentally stepped where I shouldn't have stepped or folded my arm and had a bee pinned in between." Peterson stressed that the smoker does not harm the bees.

"Financing is my main challenge, but I would like to raise enough money to buy up vacant lots, plant gardens, donate food from those gardens and have my bees there with educational apiaries to have people come out, suit up, experience the beehives and spread the word," said Peterson. "I would also like to build more partnerships in Detroit. I don't just want to be a resident of Detroit, I want to be a part of this amazing city and everything that is happening here."

HONEY HARVESTING

Peterson plans on showcasing live honey harvesting from 6-9 p.m. Aug. 30 at Detroit Distillery, 1000 Maple, in Eastern Market. Guests can taste cocktails made with the honey. Tickets are \$35 with a portion of the proceeds going to Bees in the D. For more information on Bees in the D, visit beesinthed.com.