

Prairie State Beekeepers Association is abuzz with DIY Queens and Equipment

Engaged members, their time, energy, and resources combined to form several enterprises:

For one, Prairie State now produces its own queen cells. Secondly, made possible through the woodshop of Bill Budd and his unparalleled generosity as well as the work of the Prairie State Beekeeper's many volunteers, members can mate the emerged queens in 4 frame nucs or requeen a hive.

The woodshop grew as folks were also hungry for other equipment:

- swarm traps
- solar wax melters
- honey dryers
- Michael Palmer double nucs
- Vented hive covers and much more!

Just as a single backyard hive has grown into dozens for this beekeeper, so has the Local Queen Project grown.

The local queens and equipment sales have raised thousands of dollars which were turned towards raising more than queens: the next generation of beekeepers.

In short, beekeeping scholarships were awarded and the young beekeepers were mentored through all seasons of beekeeping starting from a brand new package.

This generosity has brought its own reward. The beekeepers have found our young apiarists have been quick to catch on and are now queen larvae grafters whose rate of success far surpasses that of any adult in the club to date!

The ingredients

Inspired by Michael Palmer's sustainable apiary approach, I presented the idea of local queens to the 4 founders of Prairie State Beekeepers (Steve Petrilli, Mike Mason, Bill Budd and Rich Ramsey) 3 years ago.

At the time, I did not realize how everything would come together, but the 4 recognized the status quo of purchasing packages is a dead end. Lack of local queens crushes beginners and change is necessary. When the club began this journey, I don't believe any of us realized just how well it would do.

The Local Queen Project has been successful because of a few of key ingredients:

Number 1 was to have someone with knowledge of queen rearing. Countless hours of reading, listening to lectures while working in my basement or watching YouTube videos with my kids have allowed me to learn.

I have shared this knowledge and am comfortable that I am no longer the lynch pin in the club queen raising process. Others have this critical knowledge through observation (demonstrations) and their own willingness to learn. We conducted public demonstration to share the knowledge open to the public as well as our members free of charge. All that is needed is the desire to learn!

Number 2 is the beekeepers who have been willing to also share knowledge and, at times, resources:

- Dave Tebrugge runs 25-35 hives and was a critical part of the process supplying most of the queens when I had a terrible year of overwintered colonies due mostly to my over management.
- Bill Budd, again advocated for the building of the nucs to put bees to mate in!
- Bob Bowser enabled me to understand the critical role of excellent forage pointing back at the value of nutrition for the bees.
- Steve Petrilli has further refined my understanding of nutrition and vigorous management by demonstrating his artificial feeding protocol. Nutrition is absolutely *critical* to the success of any queen rearing program. ***Feed your bees!***
- Mike Carnduff introduced me to the styrofoam mating nuc that will be utilized this year to produce the mated queens for the club.
- Rich Ramsey created over 120 queens in August right after the fair in 2019!

Number 3 was a club leadership to completely and wholly embrace this endeavor, making the difference.

Ultimately their attitude and desire for successful beekeepers without charging people to take classes and paying for the “privilege” of learning has allowed Prairie State Beekeepers to grow by to over 110 members from zero a little over 3 years ago.

And this brings us to the last ingredient: paying it forward.

Without the scholarship we would not have had access to the young beekeepers who were capable and willing to assist in the grafting!

So, here we are, demonstrating that club queen rearing is a noble endeavor to be enjoyed by all.

The reality

All colonies utilized are donated to be used for queen rearing by members. In the past, the members would receive a cell to place in a mating nuc populated by colonies from their respective bee yard(s).

This year, however, a mating yard has been made, and drone yards are being populated by swarm colonies caught the previous year (after a check for disease) caught by our own members with swarm traps made by the volunteers in the wood work shop of Bill Budd! This yard is located in Rochester, IL, and access will be available to members of the PSBA. In addition, the club will also offer mated queens!

Utilizing the small styrofoam mating nucs, those that don't have the resources to start their own respective nucs shall have access to healthy mated queens that are ready and willing to lead a struggling colony back to health.

“A well-fed queen with good genetics will always be of higher quality and performance than a poorly fed queen with excellent genetics.” - Michael Palmer

The queens Prairie State make are enormous. The virgins are generally larger than the mated queens which arrive in packages every spring. After mating they are like giant zeppelins waddlin' across the frames.

The packages receive hastily mated queens under dubious circumstances as they are literally on a schedule. In production of our own queens, we work *with the* bees when they are ready to make said queens. This understanding allows queens to be readily and plentifully produced under a flow, with excellent natural resources ***in abundance***.

Our queen mothers are from our fellow members from colonies who successfully overwintered with an excellent spring build up. Some mothers are over 4 years old! While we don't use the “breeder” queens, the daughters of our queen mothers have proven themselves worthy.

We could have made healthy abundant queens as early as March 29th this year, but we chose to wait for drones. About April 8th or so... we will see.

The future

Queen rearing as a club is not only possible, but I believe mandatory. The benefit of getting people to understand not only the process, but the why behind the procedures is paramount to excellence in beekeeping.

This directly extends itself to the understanding ***everything*** about beekeeping. You kinda have to! Forage, management, planning... ***it all matters*** even more when raising queens of excellent quality.

Ultimately, Prairie State Beekeepers aims to advance bee knowledge and is looking to host local and nationally known speakers for presentations to that end.

If you approach your club leadership to tackle something like this, you will need bees... ideally someone with 10+ hives, or several members willing to donate the capped brood to make this happen. You can take advantage of a strong hive if you know what you are doing, but that is a wholly different presentation.

The Michael Palmer method for queen raising is hammerhead proof. ***You cannot screw it up***. You will need volunteers. And you will need someone to guide you initially.

PSBA is working on bee videos that help explain our process and what we do. I have also created a presentation (power point) and am willing to come to central region clubs to help grow this knowledge. Our goal is sustainable, ethical beekeeping. Our mission is to spread useful, and game-changing knowledge freely and to learn from those willing to share.

Change the paradigm and challenge your club to grow. It is worthwhile and fun. Because, above all:

Beekeeping should always be fun.

I will continue to add more relevant information as we have many, many endeavors on our plate through our committee platform:

- Ethics pledge
- minimal chemical management
- nutrition
- more mating yards
- comb culling
- queen rearing variations

All these and more are on the horizon. Advanced sessions will be scheduled as needed in addition to our monthly meetings. Free to our members, they hasten the learning process and hopefully prevent the misery of losing colonies simply because “they didn’t know.”

I have been fortunate to meet the founders of Prairie State Beekeepers Association and become part of the PSBA. Thank you.

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