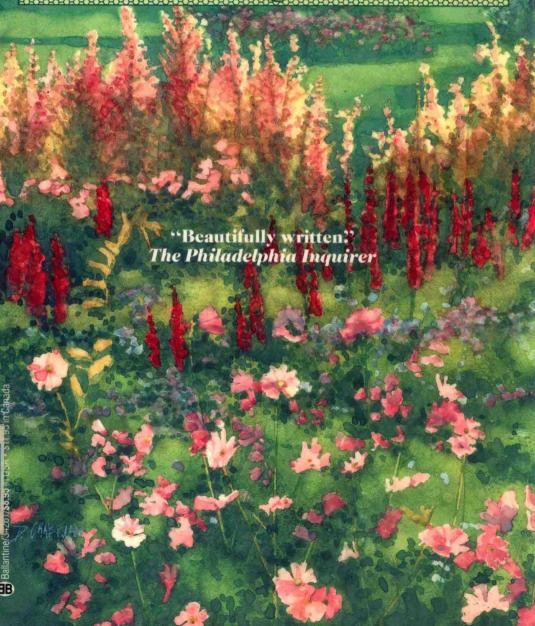
Sue Hubbell Huthorof A Country Year HBook of Bees





A BOOK OF BEES

... and How to Keep Them

SUE HUBBELL

Drawings by Sam Potthoff

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

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A Book of Bees

"Delightful. . . . Has an elegance that draws its strength from an understated prose style that rolls along without so much as a single awkward moment."

The Philadelphia Inquirer

"Sue Hubbell's writing . . . makes beekeeping—and the delights of a solitary woman living in rhythm with the land and its tiny, productive creatures—so appealing."

New Directions for Women

"Engaging. . . . Satisfying. . . . Ms. Hubbell's piquant style is as enticing as blackberry blossoms to her bees."

Winston-Salem Journal

"She gives the impression that for a long time she didn't know she was a writer. But given her skill, that is hard to believe."

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Also by Sue Hubbell

A Country Year: Living the Questions

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A BOOK OF BEES

For the sweet bee, Apis mellifera

Beekeeping is a business that requires the greatest amount of attention to small details. . . . The good beekeeper is generally more or less cranky.

-C. P. Dadant

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Contents

Acknowledgments · xi

I THE BEEKEEPER'S AUTUMN.3

II THE BEEKEEPER'S WINTER.37

III THE BEEKEEPER'S SPRING.63

IV THE BEEKEEPER'S SUMMER.127

Afterword • 175

Glossary • 179

Index • 183



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THE BEEKEEPER'S AUTUMN

The Beekeeper's Autumn

or a long, long time—for nearly forty years—I never had any bees. I can't think why. Everyone should have two or three hives of bees. Bees are easier to keep than a dog or a cat. They are more interesting than gerbils. They can be kept anywhere. A well-known New York City publisher keeps bees on the terrace of his Upper East Side penthouse, where they happily work the flowers in Central Park.

I have had bees now for fifteen years, and my life is the better for it. I operate a beekeeping and honey-producing farm in the Ozark Mountains of southern Missouri. I keep three hundred hives of bees, separated into groups of ten or twelve, in what are called outyards—land that I rent from other farmers at the cost of a gallon of honey a year, rent I pay to the farmers for the privilege of putting the bees there. The farmers and their families like the honey, but they like having the bees on their land even better. The clover in their pastures is more luxuriant because the bees are there to polli-

nate it, and the vegetables in their gardens and the fruit on their trees benefit from the bees, too. My best and most productive beeyards, however, are those near towns, because townspeople plant flowers and water both their flowers and clover-scattered lawns, providing the bees with a constant supply of fresh blossoms to secrete nectar which they turn into honey.

Every once in a while I read in the beekeeping magazines about someone who has had complaints about his bees. I am always astonished, because around here everyone has a fine friendly feeling toward them. My own beekeeping operation is a matter of minor local pride, and is the focus of interest and curiosity. People come out to my farm and ask if they may tour the "honey factory." I am asked to speak to local civic groups and high school biology classes. The bees themselves are regarded with a certain amount of affection and good humor.

The town in which I live is very small. All the other farmers raise pigs and cattle, and making a living from bees does give them something to talk about down at the café other than fescue foot and the price of pork bellies. Cows and pigs are large animals, and the farmers keep track of them by putting a numbered ear tag on each beast's ear. It tickles their fancies that someone can make a living with a bunch of wild bugs who can't be penned and marked, but who fly everywhere, unruly but helpful, pollinating plants and making honey. They enjoy telling jokes on me, I know.

Nelson is the town wit. Like any Ozark storyteller, he piles outrage on top of outrage without even the smallest trace of a smile. It was Nelson who, straightfaced, spread it around town that when a swarm of bees gathered on my mailbox and stayed there for several days, it was because I hadn't put enough postage stamps under their wings. Nelson said it was a well-known fact that with proper postage a bee could travel anywhere in the continental U.S. of A. "'Course if they was to go abroad, the rate is a mite higher. Maybe

they was. Seems like a smart lady like Sue ought to know how much postage to put on a bee."

I was sitting in the café one day with Nelson and some of the other good old boys, when Nelson, deadpan, said, "Say, one of your bees was over a-bothering my peach tree this morning."

"How'd you know she was mine, Nelson?" I asked, looking him straight in the eye. I was determined to put up a fight this time.

Nelson hadn't expected my question.

"Why, they're all yours, aren't they? I thought you owned every blessed bee around here, the way you're always talking 'em up at the Chamber of Commerce meetings."

"No, that isn't true. There are wild ones in trees all over, and then Henry has some, and so does Billy, right here in town. I'll tell you what you've got to do before you carry on so about my bees bothering your peach tree. What you've got to do, Nelson, is go over to that tree and check the ear tag on the bee. The first thing I do after a new bee is born is to put an ear tag on her ear. You check the tag and you tell me her number, and then I'll let you know if I'm going to accept responsibility for that bee."

Nelson threw back his head and laughed.

A report of our exchange went around the café. This was several years ago, but even now every once in a while someone will stop me in town and say, "Hey, Bee Lady, I saw Number three fifty-seven on a clover blossom in my lawn today."

"That so? How's she looking?"

"Jest fine. Better in fact than the last time I saw her, when I thought she looked a mite peaked."

"Good to hear she's improved."

The end of one honey season is the start of the next, and autumn is a good time to begin with bees. It is when many people buy a few hives from an established beekeeper and move them from his place to theirs, because at that time a beekeeper is often willing to

sell some of his hives at a lower price than he would in springtime. He has already taken his honey crop, and there is always a certain amount of risk in carrying a hive through the winter, a risk that is transferred to the buyer.

Summer's end is also the beginning of a new cycle for bees. It is then that they prepare for the winter ahead, and their preparations, along with the help a beekeeper can give them, determine how good the next season will be.

In any part of the country where there are flower-killing frosts, bees need to store up honey for the cold months during which they will no longer be able to forage for fresh nectar. Here in the Ozarks, where winters are severe but interspersed with mild days when the bees can be active, they need about seventy-five or eighty pounds of stored honey to see them through.

In some places, bees make their winter stores principally from late-blooming goldenrod, but the Ozark bees generally scorn these flowers, preferring the Aster ericoides—the snow aster or Michaelmas daisy, a plant that grows widely throughout the United States. Asters, in general, are much beloved by bees; I have seen them working as happily on asters in New Hampshire or Michigan as at home in Missouri. Snow asters are tough but dainty-appearing plants with small flowers—white rays around golden centers. The foliage is delicate and feathery, reminiscent of heather, which is the meaning of its Latin species name, erica. Snow asters grow wherever they can gain a roothold, filling abandoned fields and edging back roads with their delicate white blossoms. They do not mind drought or light frosts, and continue to bloom bravely from August until the arrival of the first killing frost. Snow asters are so common that they are seldom noticed except by bees and beekeepers, to whom they are among the most cheerful of flowers.

I can tell when the bees have started working asters, because the nectar they gather from them is rank, and I can smell the hives a long way off. The odor so struck me the first autumn I was keeping

bees that I thought perhaps there was American Foulbrood, a deadly bacterial disease, in my hives. I had never yet been around a hive with this disease, but I had read that it could be detected by its unpleasant odor. Now that I know better, the smell of aster honey does not seem bad; it is a strong, fine scent, a sign that the bees will winter well.

I like to go out and check all the hives once before winter, and do so when it is still warm enough to open them for inspection if I need to. First, though, I suit up in bee coveralls. These are made of loose-cut white cotton, with zippers in all the right places to keep bees out. They are extra long in the legs so that they can be tucked into a pair of high-top work boots, and have a zipper around the shoulders that mates with the zipper on the bottom of the bee veil, which, in turn, is fitted to the crown of a lightweight helmet with an elastic band. I wear bee coveralls whenever I work my bees, and they are a good investment for any beginning beekeeper. Those new to bees are usually nervous about being stung, and the best way to avoid being stung is to relax and move easily and confidently among them. There is nothing that gives a person more confidence in the presence of bees than to be zipped snugly inside a bee suit.

I take along a few extra beehive parts to replace broken ones I noticed when I last visited the hives, as well as some two-foot lengths of board to put under the hives if I need to replace rotting ones. Dampness harms bees, and a few boards placed there allows air to circulate and keeps them dry. I also put in the back of my pickup a tall metal five-gallon can with the top removed to hold the bee smoker I use to quiet the bees—and the tools I'll need to open the hives if I have to. I throw in a feed sack stuffed with baling twine to use as smoker fuel, some matches, my bee recordkeeping book, a pencil, my bee veil and helmet, long leather bee gauntlets, my lunch and a thermos of ice water. I am ready to go.

The first group of beeyards I am going to visit this autumn is thirty miles to the south, near one of the prettiest towns I know—