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I am not sure what started me wanting to become a keeper of bees. I have always had a love and genuine interest in nature. Even as a child I was fascinated by all creatures, insects, plants and animals. I would bring home any assortment of the above, make it my pet and nurture it, all much to my mother's dismay.

I have this very vivid memory as a child; probably I was around 8 or 9 years old and I used to love to watch the honeybees on the clover in our yard. I used to pick them up, gently cupping them in my hands. Not sure why I did this, I would listen to the bees and watch them go about their business. Back at that time, it was very common to see honeybees all the time on the clover and flowers in our yard. Sadly, I hear too often from people that they don't see bees anymore. I of course, in the last couple of years see them in my yard now because I had 3 hives. But before I started my hives, I did not see many bees at all.

It all started back in 2014 when my best friend Darlene and I decided we would take a Beekeeping class being offered here in Frederick County. Most beekeeping classes take place in January and February. Spring, summer, and fall are very busy times for beekeepers so the winter is the best time for these classes.

Our class probably had about 40 beekeepers in it. We not only learned about the bees themselves but learned about what things are endangering them, such as loss of foraging areas which affects their nutrition. Lack of nutrition can then affect their ability to fight off diseases and pests. We learned of the types of plants that are most beneficial to honeybees and other pollinators, components of hives, types of hives, how to build and maintain hives, and also products of the hive, such as honey, wax, propolis, and pollen. We also learned of the laws in our area concerning keeping honeybees.

The class was three 8-hour Saturday classes, with the 4th class being the field day in the spring. This would be the time the “new bees” would don their brand new white bee suits and go to a local apiary and have their first look inside a real hive. I will have to say, as much as I loved holding a single bee as a child, it can be quite daunting when you are near 20+ hives that each holds maybe 90,000 bees with them all flying about.

Many people take the class because they like the idea of getting their own honey and possibly selling honey, and perhaps harvesting the wax for soap and candle making. I too was interested in all those things but my main concern was always the bee. As time evolved it was even more important for me to ensure my honeybees always came first.

After the completion of our bee class, most of my fellow bee classmates bought all the necessary equipment to keep bees. This would be the bee suit, hives and all their components. I being, somewhat cautious and on a strict budget at the time, decided to wait a year. I thought I would take this time to prepare my yard and pick my apiary site. It is very important to have your hives in a specific direction. They should always face east. It is also good if you can put them in an area that does provide some spotty shade in the summer and full sun in the winter. It is best to try to place the hives somewhere that provides a natural wind block such as a hill, building or evergreen tree. This provides protection from cold winds during the winter. I took this time to study bees more and I volunteered to maintain a hive at a local nature center with a seasoned beekeeper as my mentor. I also took stock of my yard and what I had planted. I wanted to plant native plants that would provide foraging nutrition for the bees most of the year. I wanted plants, shrubs and trees to always be in bloom from early spring through late fall. My planting of bee-friendly native plants would not necessarily keep my bees in my yard. Honeybees will travel 2-3 miles during foraging. I thought it would be nice anyway, if they felt like staying close to home.

By 2015 I was ready to order my bees! I ordered 2 “Packages” in January for April delivery. A package consists of about 30,000 bees and a queen. I had my hives up, properly placed, and leveled. We met the truck at an abandoned warehouse parking lot in Frederick City and got in line to pick up our packages. It was very encouraging to see the number of people that are interested in beekeeping.

I brought my bees home and put them in the hive. I started out with 2 hives. One of the hives swarmed a month later, which means they take the queen and leave. This is a natural occurrence of honeybees. There are bees that will be left behind that will then make a new queen. I was able to re-catch the swarm because they only swarmed into a tree right above where they left. This happened in the spring of 2015. I still have that same hive. The bees are not the same bees, but they are descendants of that swarm hive. Sadly my other 2 hives that made it through the winter of 2015 did not make it this year. I am currently awaiting results from the Beltsville Bee Lab as to the cause of death.

It is quite a learning experience with these honeybees. There is a beekeeping saying that, “you can read all the books you want but the bees don’t read the books. Bees will do what they want. When you think you have them figured out, you realize you don’t.” So a beekeeper is always learning. I joined a Worldwide Beekeepers Group on LinkedIn. It is very interesting to see how the rest of the world keeps bees.

Bees are amazing to watch. One of the most amazing things about bees is they just don’t care about people and they are always working. They are there to do their job and couldn’t care less about you unless of course they feel threatened by you. Each and every bee has their own job and they just do it. They are a great lesson in work ethic and teamwork. There are many prisons that are training their inmates to become beekeepers with the premise it is teaching them

a new skill of beekeeping. I think perhaps there is a secondary skill they are learning and maybe that would be teamwork and socialization skills. Perhaps another reason I became a beekeeper:

In Hebrew the meaning of the name Debra is Bee.