

The Generosity of the Honeybee

by Peeka Trenkle

Consider the honeybee. This busy little creature works invisibly and ceaselessly: making honey, collecting pollen, manufacturing beeswax, building honeycomb, tending the hive, and pollinating the flowers. Honeybees will travel 55,000 miles and visit 2 million flowers to make one pound of honey. They pollinate about 80% of our food crops. Without our honeybees, our plants would die and we would quickly cease to exist.

In the past few years there has been a lot of news about colony collapse disorder - the mysterious way in which bees are dying and disappearing in greater numbers than ever before. Over the past 15 years, the population of bees, both domestic and wild has declined by approximately 75% worldwide. Bees, like frogs, are considered an indicator species, an animal that will show the overall state of the health of the environment. The loss of our bees is, in fact, as serious an environmental issue as global warming and should command as much concern.

Yet, when the topic of bees is brought up in everyday conversation, there is often much fear and apprehension. Rarely is there a sense of wonder and awe at the miraculous nature of this lovely pollinator. There is a common, irrational fear that bees are aggressive or dangerous. But the honeybee is generally quite gentle and manageable, and, although not really tameable, has lived in partnership with humans for over 10,000 years. It is worthwhile for us to cultivate a positive attitude toward the industrious honeybee who gives us so much.

The material gifts from the honeybee are many and have been used for food and medicine since the beginning of recorded history. Her Latin name is *Apis mellifera* - 'honey-bearer' - and, of course, honey has been the primary and most popular gift she has given.

Honey has medicinal and nutritional value. It is the only natural sweetener that does not require additional refining or processing in order to be eaten. Honey contains traces of many minerals, vitamins, trace elements, amino acids and enzymes. Eating local honey can have powerful health benefits. It is believed that because the bees gather nectar from local flora, the honey can have a strengthening affect on the body's ability to adapt to environmental stress.

Another gift from the hive is the pollen that is collected by the bees and used as a primary source of food. Some beekeepers collect this pollen and sell it as a nutritional supplement. Pollen is rich in amino acids, trace elements and enzymes. Care should be taken by people with allergies to pollen but folk wisdom has taught that pollen, like honey, has a beneficial affect on the immune system.

There is another substance that is created by the bees called **royal jelly**. It is produced by young bees, from special glands in their heads and fed in large quantities to the queen. It is this food, along with honey, that enables the queen to lay as many as 2,000 eggs a day during the spring season. The total weight of these eggs exceeds the weight of the queen herself - but she is constantly producing new eggs in her body as long as she is fed enough royal jelly. Royal jelly has been used medicinally for centuries as a rejuvenative tonic. Given the almost alchemical nature of this substance, it should be used only sparingly if at all, reserved for situations where deep healing is needed,

Beeswax has been gathered and used in candle making throughout the world. This time of year, as the light wanes and the weather grows cold, it is lovely to burn beeswax candles at night. The bees make this wax from glands in their abdomens and build the honeycomb from it. It has a delicious aroma and the light from beeswax candles has a unique, warm glow to it.

One last bee product that is sometimes used medicinally is **bee propolis**. This is a resin that bees collect from conifer trees and pack around their hive to protect it against infestations and diseases. People have used propolis as an anti-biotic type of substance. It can be made into an extract in alcohol and used as gargle for sore throats, among other things.

These material gifts alone should be sufficient to give one pause, stimulate thought, and begin a stirring of gratitude for the honeybee. But the greatest gift that the bees have to give us is the nature by which they live. One hive might consist of 30,000 bees but is considered one being. The intelligence and organizational capacity of the hive is one of the most beautiful spectacles of nature. Each individual worker lives only between 15-35 days during the growing season (longer in the winter) and is working from the day she emerges from her cell - working for the wellbeing of the hive, working to keep the plant world alive and healthy. Revered as sacred in many cultures of the world, indispensable, and often invisible, the honeybee is the epitome of generosity.

"When one stands before a hive of bees, one should say quite solemnly to oneself, 'By way of the hive the whole cosmos enters man and makes him strong and able' "

– Rudolph Steiner