

# REGION

NEWS FROM NORTHWEST LOWER MICHIGAN

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NEWS TIP LINE (231) 933-1472



"It changes their mind," said beekeeper Bill Hathaway about the smoker he uses while working with his bees. The bees aren't as defensive about his presence when he squirts some smoke into the hive first.



Hathaway wears protective clothing but still gets stung. He said he doesn't have arthritis because he's been stung so much, and he doesn't know a beekeeper who does. Hathaway first became interested in bees in 1966. He bought equipment from Sears and started two colonies and increased to 10 in his second year, although he lost half when they swarmed away.

## THE BEES' NEEDS

**B**ill Hathaway first became interested in bees when a swarm moved into a tree next to his house in 1966. "I stood there watching them and said, 'This is stupid, I want to know what's going on inside.'"

That and a kit from Sears started Hathaway on a career in beekeeping.

"I will keep a hive of bees around as long as I live," he said.

This time of year, Hathaway works to ensure the health of his colonies, which he rents to farmers so the bees can pollinate their fields. In the fall, he packs up his hives and ships them to Florida, where they pollinate watermelons.

Migratory beekeeping has become increasingly more important as mites have depleted the numbers of bees in the wild. In the past decade, up to 90 percent of the feral, or wild, bees in the Midwest have been wiped out by mite varieties that attack a bee's trachea and larva.

"We have very few feral hives because of these mites," said Nikki Rothwell, a district pest management agent at the Michigan State

University Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Station in Elmwood Township.

"You're lucky to find a feral hive anymore."

Hathaway said the number of his bee colonies dive-bombed from 650 colonies to 150 over three years in the late 1990s. Now, the number is back to about 300 after letting natural selection weed out bees not resistant to the mites. Pesticides were time consuming, expensive and if not used at the right time could end up in the honey, he said.

This drives up the cost of bees. Rothwell said the rate farmers pay for bees has gone up in places like California, where almonds are in increasing demand.

Farmers in this area can rent hives for about \$45 to \$55 a hive until petal drop, which is when the plants can't be pollinated anymore. Petal drop can take as long as six weeks, depending on the plant and other conditions. In California, hives are being rented for as much as \$150 each until petal drop.

"I expect our costs will go up in coming years," Rothwell said.



Hathaway takes a second to wipe his face before putting on a net to protect his face from his bees.



"If you play with bees, you're going to get stung," said Hathaway. "I'll get stung a half a dozen times today. It hurts every time ... every time."



Hathaway explains the best way to prepare an English muffin with the honey from his bees he sells at the Traverse City Farmer's Market Saturday at the barns area of Grand Traverse Commons. Hathaway sells orange blossom and star thistle varieties, as well as creamed honey, from the spring and fall.

**Story and photos**  
**Jan-Michael Stump**