

# Bees, PLEASE

Family stays as busy as their bees tending to Lebanon business

## Fun Facts About Bees

- ▶ A worker bee's role in the colony changes as the bee ages. The youngest are nurse bees and care for the larva. Middle-aged bees are field bees. They fly out to collect pollen and nectar for the entire colony. The eldest bees are guard bees.
- ▶ A worker bee lives about six weeks. Queen bees live from several months to several years.
- ▶ Bees store nectar in their stomachs. When they get back to the colony, the workers pass the nectar from one bee to another until the water has evaporated. At that point, it is honey and stored in honeycomb cells.
- ▶ A vigorous colony contains 20,000 to 80,000 honeybees. Each frame in a bee box has around 1,700 adult bees caring for the larva inside.

## Story and photos by Danita Cahill

Aaron Lafond and his 15-year-old son Felix, work efficiently together in the bee yard in rural Albany. Working with honeybees is quiet, contemplative work.

The bees' immediate buzzing causes the drone of nearby I-5 traffic to fall away.

Dressed in full beekeeping gear, Aaron removes the top section of a wooden bee box and pumps a bee smoker, blowing smoke from the smoldering cardboard rolled up inside. The smoke settles around the honeybees and tricks them into eating.

"In the wild, if the bees smelled smoke it would be from a wildfire," Aaron says. "They would need to gorge themselves so they'd be ready



Father and son, Aaron Lafond, left, and Felix, work together on the family bee hives. Felix is the third generation of beekeepers in the family.

to fly to safety."

The smoke also makes a beekeeper's work easier and less painful.

"When they have full bellies, they're slower and calmer," Aaron says.

Aaron and Felix open the hives—it's called splitting—to feed the bees pollen patties and check on the health of the hives. The pollen patties stimulate the queens to start laying lots of eggs.

The Lafonds are preparing their bees for almond

pollination season.

Father and son make sure there is a healthy queen inside each hive and that there are at least five to eight frames of active bees. If there has been die out in some of the hives—most often caused by varroa mites—Aaron and Felix take frames of active bees out of half-sized nucleus hives and add them to the full-sized hives.

Relocated worker bees continue doing their chores, serving their new queen and colony without missing a beat.

The Lafonds annually prepare 1,800 hives for transport to California. The

bees spend late January through April in the Sacramento Valley. They start pollinating almond trees in February.

California's almond bloom is the biggest pollination event in the world.

Afterward, the Lafonds transport their bees from California back to the Willamette Valley, where they lease the bees out to pollinate Oregon crops such as turnips, blueberries, radish, clovers, Chinese cabbage, sunflowers, spinach, coriander and meadowfoam.

Some hives are placed near patches of wild blackberries so the bees can make delicious blackberry honey.

"Blackberries are the main honey crop in Oregon," Aaron says. "Blackberries produce two times more honey than any other crop."

Honeybees are not only the family's livelihood, they are an ancestral endeavor. Aaron is a third-generation beekeeper and is in the process of passing the bee smoker off to Felix—the fourth generation.

Aaron's grandfather, Felix Edson Lafond of Sweet Home, started keeping bees at age 15 as a hobby. In 1986, he went commercial with them.

"Dad worked with Grandpa in bees," Aaron says. "Grandpa did bees until he retired."

Aaron flipped back and forth between bees and cabinetry work for years, until 2013 when he started Southpaw Bees & Manufacturing LLC. In 2016, he took over his dad's business, Cascade Honey and Pollination.

Aaron still uses his



**ABOVE:** Aaron checks a bee frame while preparing hives for transport to California for the almond pollination season. **TOP:** Oregon raw honey comes mostly from wild blackberry pollen.

woodworking skills to build bee boxes, bee pallets, and bee box lids and bottoms. He builds 500 to 1,000 bee boxes a year for himself, and 4,000 to 5,000 a year for other apiarists.

The entire family is involved in the bee business. Aaron's wife, Beth, bottles and sells some of their 85 or so barrels a year of raw honey to retail customers. She also sells bulk honey by the bucket or barrel to wholesale customers such as Glory Bee in Eugene. The Lafonds also melt beeswax into blocks and wholesale the wax to candle makers and others.

Their three children help with the bees, especially in the almond orchards. They all help Aaron in the wood shop, too.

Although Gabrianna, 16, and Isaiah, 13, have other life paths in mind, Felix thinks he will continue with bees.

"He's a good worker," Aaron says.

Asked if he gets stung every time he works with his bees, Aaron shrugs and says, "It's part of the job." ■

*For more information on Southpaw Bees' honey, call or text Beth at 541-401-4185.*



**Aaron checks each hive to ensure it has an active queen.**

### Want to Attract Bees to Your Yard?

Aaron and Beth offer the following advice:

- ▶ Provide a water source.
- ▶ Grow lots of flowers, especially fragrant flowers.
- ▶ Grow herbs such as lavender, oregano and sage.
- ▶ Plant fruit trees, flowering ornamental fruit trees and native trees such as big-leaf maple, wild cherry and Hawthorne.
- ▶ If you use pesticides, protect the bees by carefully following the label. "There are bee-safe insecticides out there," Aaron says. Spray pesticides and fungicides in the evening after bees have gone back to their hives for the night.

Even if bees freak you out, try to stay calm when they fly or work close to you. Swatting at bees agitates them, making them more likely to sting. If you leave honeybees alone, they will leave you alone.