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## Beekeepers buzz with enthusiasm, even in winter

Hobby popular for many reasons, including awareness of ecological issues and better understanding of role honeybees play.

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Beekeeper Gerry Mack with some of his hives. LIBBY MACK PHOTO -

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For information on the Mecklenburg Beekeepers Association, go to [www.meckbees.org/Home/tabid/74/Default.aspx](http://www.meckbees.org/Home/tabid/74/Default.aspx) or call 704-358-8075.

As the mercury dips into the teens, you are not likely to envision burgers on the grill and honeybees dancing on freshly blooming wildflowers that make mid-April evenings so pleasant in the Queen City.

Honeybees? Did I just mention honeybees in the throes of winter? Yep, and if you are one of the hundreds of urban beekeepers in Mecklenburg County, the tiny insects are never far from your thoughts, regardless of the season.

Winter in North Carolina is actually a critical period for preparing bee colonies for the active spring and summer months ahead by ensuring their supply and access to food is adequate to maintain their health during winter's cold.

Enthusiasm for urban beekeeping has grown considerably over the past decade, according to Libby Mack, treasurer of the Mecklenburg County Beekeepers Association, a local nonprofit chapter of the N.C. State Beekeepers Association.

"Our membership is up considerably from the time my husband and I joined in 2000," said Mack, "We are at about 250 members and still growing. There are a number of reasons for this, including a heightened awareness of ecological issues, better understanding of the role honeybees play in our ecosystem, and more people have discovered how much fun and interesting beekeeping can be.

"People want to contribute to the environment in a positive way, and beekeeping is a great way to do that."

The local chapter is a group of beekeeping enthusiasts who share fellowship, camaraderie and their love of the hobby at monthly meetings and special gatherings throughout the year. Annual membership is only \$5, and guests and visitors are welcome at the meetings.

The organization offers introductory and ongoing education for the novice and experienced beekeeper.

Mack strongly encouraged those with even an inkling of interest to sign up for Bee School 2011. The eight-week introductory program explores how honeybees make honey, how to establish and care for your own hive, extracting and bottling your own honey and more.

The \$50 course requires advance registration and includes a one-year membership in the Mecklenburg County Beekeepers Association.

The hobby, while not prohibitively expensive, does have some costs associated with it. According to Mack, beginning beekeepers can expect to spend about \$250 in start-up costs, which include a single hive (with bees), some protective clothing and basic tools.

Beyond that, like any hobby, costs can run considerably higher depending on how far you want to take it.

Mack and her husband, Gerry, have taken their enthusiasm for tending to the tiny, industrious *apis mellifera* (the Latin term means "honey-bearing bee") and created a small home-based business selling honey and related products.

Based in Myers Park, Charlotte Very Local Honey is a company the Macks started about four years ago to share the bounty and the enthusiasm they've garnered from their hives. All the honey they produce comes from inside Charlotte city limits, with two hives in their backyard in Myers Park and several others in a nearby bee yard.

"We harvested about 150 pounds per hive last year from eight producing hives," Mack said. "The honey harvested is a wildflower mix that comes primarily from tulip poplar trees and hollies, though there are a large variety of blooming wildflowers that contribute to the honey we collect."

Mack's enthusiasm for the hobby is infectious.

"It is a fascinating hobby, as honeybees are fascinating creatures," she said. "They are extremely engaging to watch, hardw collaborative."

Perhaps there are some lessons in that for all of us.

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