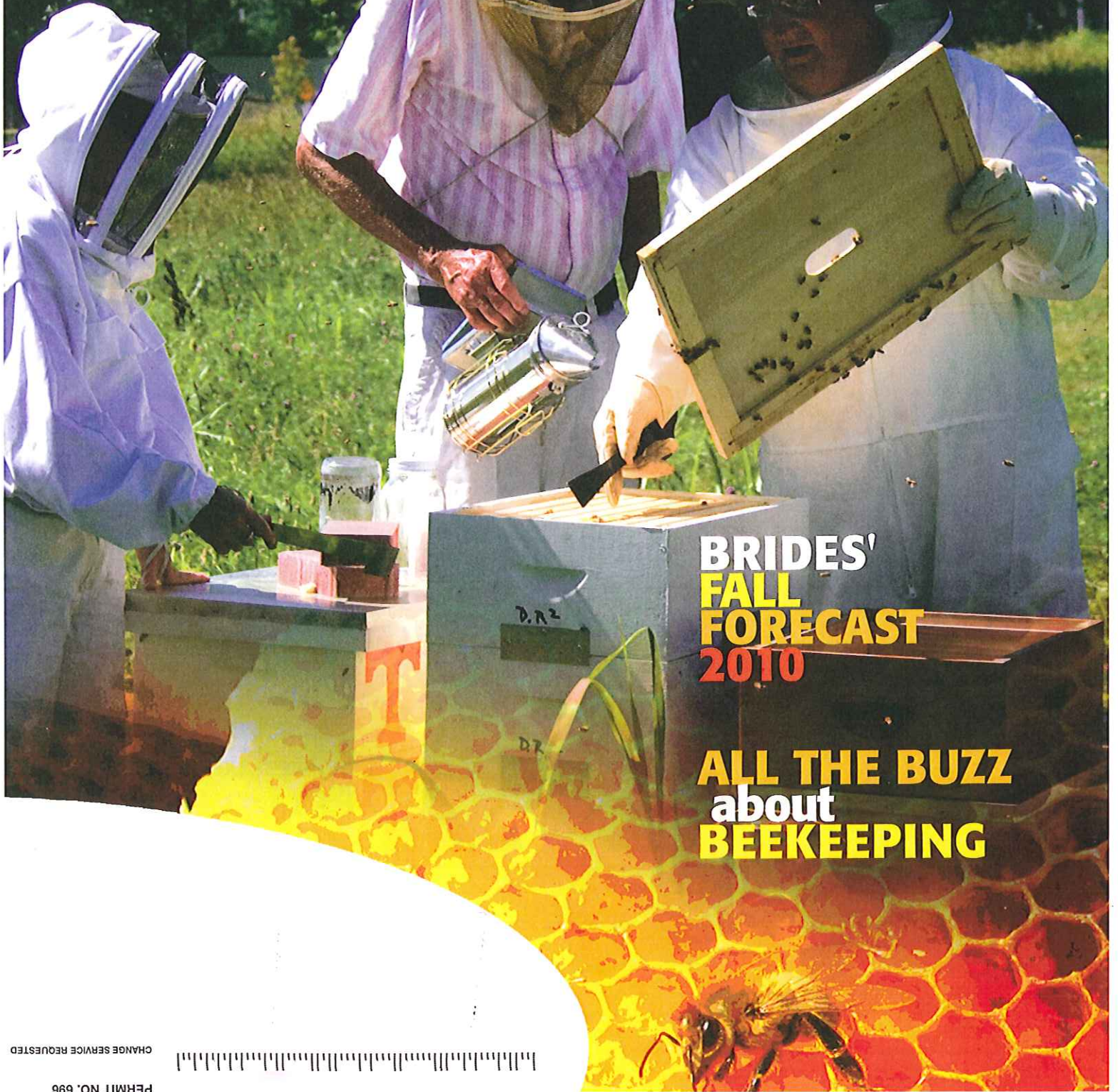


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**BRIDES'
FALL
FORECAST
2010**

**ALL THE BUZZ
about
BEEKEEPING**

THE BUZZ

About Beekeepers

Local association seeks to educate and inspire.

ON A HOT SUMMER AFTER-NOON, honeybees circle around a cluster of box-shaped hives along the edge of a field of clover.

A few beekeepers wear nets over their faces as they tend to the boxes. Some wear gloves, while others use their bare hands, preferring dexterity to protection while lifting the delicate frames covered with buzzing bees.

The beekeepers are students of a new mentoring program created by the Tennessee Valley Beekeepers Association. This group is led by Joe Lockhart, who holds a “smoker” and directs a few puffs of smoke into the hives “just to let ‘em know we’re coming.” The smoke sedates the bees so the keepers can gently lift the lids and frames to check on them. TVBA is an independent club that began about five years ago with a resurgence of interest in beekeeping. It was formed to promote the craft of beekeeping and provide education to the community while supporting area beekeepers.

Thirty years ago, this area was inhabited by a large number of bees and many keepers, but when a foreign mite decimated the bee population in the 1980s, the beekeepers lost heart and the practice of beekeeping dwindled along with the bees. TVBA member Robert Gray says that today the wild bee population is ten percent of what

it was then. But thanks to organizations like the TVBA and its mentor class, the beekeepers are returning. Beginning in February 2010, mentor participants learned about beekeeping in an introductory lecture course open to the public. After the course, students who signed up for the mentoring program—about 30 in all, ranging in age from high school students to retirees—were divided between three mentors that met with each group once a month from April through October.

Students received hives, a supply of about 9,000 bees and a queen bee. Although that may seem like quite a few bees, a hive will grow to as many as 60,000 bees at its peak. Student beekeepers visit the hives a couple of times a week to monitor the bees. When the bees have outgrown their home, student keepers add another “super,” which is a sort of box with wooden frames set inside on which the bees build honeycomb.

Sometimes, the bees develop mites—a problem which was never completely solved, though beekeepers have spent years trying.

“When mites affected the bees [in the eighties], everyone was looking for ways to control it,” Gray says. “Our solution is raising bees as natural as you can, not using chemicals.” Gray says the students ensure the beehives have proper ventilation, and they dust the bees with powdered sugar. The sugar grains get stuck in the feet cups of the mites, and when the bees groom themselves, the mites fall onto a sticky board at the bottom of the hive.

Many people are wary of bees, a result of bad past experiences. Gray says that the mentors teach students ways to protect themselves from stings, such as wearing the proper equipment, handling bees gently, and standing to the side instead of at the hive’s entrance. Another way is simply to raise gentler varieties of bees, which are focused on their work and aren’t likely to become aggressive. It is typical to get a few stings, so beekeeping isn’t for those who are allergic, but Gray says most keepers can handle it.

One of the reasons for beekeeping is, of course, the honey, which is certainly a perk of the process. Two of the program mentors sell their honey locally at farmers’ markets and stands, and in July, the TVBA held a honey extraction demonstration for the students. However, most hives don’t create much honey the first year, which is instead spent establishing the colony.

More important than honey, many of the keepers get into beekeeping for its benefits to gardening. Gray says that gardening and beekeeping go hand in hand. The TVBA is looking into partnering with urban gardening programs in the area to provide another facet to the gardening process and perhaps garner more interest in beekeeping.

Kitty Quinn, one of the students, is on her third season of beekeeping. After becoming interested in beekeeping to pollinate her garden—and to do something about the decline of the bee population—she decided to take up the hobby.

She joined the TVBA and took the mentoring course because she says she figured an experienced mentor would be able to provide plenty of knowledge and support.

“I am still trying to learn as much as I can,” she says. “Bees are so amazing and there is so much to learn. I just can’t get enough of it!” Gray says that kind of enthusiasm for learning about bees is what the TVBA hopes to impart to its students and the community.—Melissa Swanson

For more information on the TVBA and its mentor class, visit www.tennvalleybeekeepers.org.



Checking the hives.



TVBA Program Coordinator Robert Gray, left, and mentor Joe Lockhart work with novice beekeepers each summer. Lockhart is one of three mentors.