

Easy backyard beekeeping

Forget honeybees, you can be a backyard beekeeper with minimal effort when you host native bees

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Backyard beekeeping is big in Portland, but it's also increasing in popularity worldwide, said bee educator Rebekah Golden.

She teaches classes on how to be a backyard beekeeper at Bee Thinking, a locally owned beekeeping supply store and education center in Southeast Portland.

But she didn't always like bees. Her entire life, Golden said, she was "quite fearful" of the little pollinators. She originally studied ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Arizona with the intent of studying chimps in Africa.

It was when she worked as a research assistant in a bumblebee pollination lab that she

discovered bees were far more docile and unique than she had ever imagined.

"I fell in love with them," she said.

"There are 4,000 native bee species to North America. Most of them are not social and don't produce honey like honeybees do - honeybees were actually introduced from Europe in the 1600s," she said. "Most of our pollination is done by our native bees, and they are actually better at pollinating than honeybees. The way we use our honeybees as commercial pollinators is actually a misuse of their skills."

The mason bee will pollinate 95 out of every 100 blossoms it visits, making it very popular with gardeners who have cherry,

apple or other fruit trees. It's also quite gentle compared to the honeybee, Golden said.

While honeybees live in large colonies that need to be managed, a single female mason bee will take care of all her own young.

Bee Thinking builds several alternative models of backyard hives for honeybees, made from sustainably sourced wood grown in the Pacific Northwest. For those who want to keep honeybees, starter kits range upward from \$99 without the hive, and \$349 with a hive.

But for about \$20 to \$30, they also offer mason bee houses you can stock with paper tubing for bees to nest in. These small houses look more like birdhouses than beehives and require very little

maintenance.

Mason bee houses can hang from a building or in a tree, and should be about 6 feet off the ground. You can also purchase cocoons and place them in the paper tubing where they will nest.

Bees will emerge from the tubes and pollinate your garden; then it's hands off until October, Golden said.

The bees will hibernate in the winter, so in the fall, remove the cocoons from the tubing, get rid of any that have parasites or disease, and then stick them in a refrigerator for safe keeping until the spring.

Bumblebees and many of Oregon's

Get a permit

You can visit Portland Urban Beekeepers' website to learn more about the permitting process at portlandurbanbeekeepers.org.

Take a class

Bee Thinking offers beginner beekeeping classes for \$30. They are typically held from 6 to 9 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Meet the experts

On June 28, Mace Vaughan, Pollinator Program co-director at The Xerces Society; Ben Bowell, organic education specialist at Oregon Tilth; and Rebekah Golden will each give a short lecture for an In Good Tilth magazine launch party at Bee Thinking's store and mead taproom at 1744 SE Hawthorne.



PHOTOS BY ARKADY BROWN

Rebekah Golden is an educator at Bee Thinking, a beekeeping supply store in Southeast Portland. She said many of Oregon's native bees are docile, solitary pollinators that prefer native plants.

other native ground-nesting bees require even less maintenance.

One of Oregon's native ground-nesting bees, the mining bee, is so docile that children at Sabin Elementary in Northeast Portland call it the "tickle bee," and made it their school mascot. Thousands of mining bees make their home at the school, and they earned their nickname because they "tickle" when they touch the students' skin.

To accommodate ground nesters, simply leave a bare patch of loosely packed earth that gets some south or southeastern morning sunlight, Golden said. The trick is to simply leave it alone throughout the year.

"You'll see people who have planter boxes with perfectly manicured and mowed lawns, and it's really organized and aesthetically pleasing," Golden said. "Or you could have something that looks just a little more chaotic, and is lived in."

In addition to leaving some bare patches of ground, she recommends planting perennial grasses, which have extensive root systems that make good homes for ground-nesting bees. Allowing some weeds to grow will give pollinators a pollen and nectar source when many other flowers aren't in bloom.

She also recommends avoiding pesticides, especially neonicotinoids.

"There are a lot of

different neonicotinoids, and it's under dozens of names in products you can purchase off any garden store shelf. A lot of people know neonicotinoids are bad, and don't want to spray them, but then don't realize that that's what they are using," Golden said.

"Even some natural pesticides are going to have problems," she said. "They mostly come from really concentrated plant compounds, but those plants were evolving for thousands of years to combat herbivores, so it's still very toxic, even though it's natural."

Throughout evolution, as plants up their toxicity, insects evolve a resistance.

"It's kind of this arms race between the two," Golden said. "Whereas pollinators have spent thousands of years in a mutualistic relationship with plants, so they don't have a lot of the same pathways that develop resistances to pesticides or to other plant compounds, so a lot of times they are more susceptible to those toxins than other insects are."

While you will not need a permit from the city to keep mason or ground-nesting bees, you will if you want to have a honeybee hive. You will also be required to notify your neighbors, have a visual barrier and meet a number of other requirements. If you rent, you will need written permission from your landlord.

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weed. I knew something about addiction, because I knew about alcoholism. I was against it. I didn't know, though, about cocaine."

And now he had all that money. "It sucked me in completely, smoking crack. Your mind and your body loved it. It made the relationship so powerful, the intimacy. I didn't realize that the drug was part of it and that it wasn't real. I stopped doing my job the way I had been. I had done my job in order, methodically. I was real and sincere."

But now that he was smoking crack, Joseph starting taking shortcuts, and was always in a hurry to get back to his girlfriend. He quit his job, because he was

too ashamed to stay. He had always been proud of his work, but could not do it well as an addict, and the embarrassment was too much.

That addiction lasted for more than 20 years, and led to chronic homelessness and eventually heroin. Though Joseph did not have a place of his own, he rarely slept outside. "Wouldn't ever stay anywhere for more than a week. You lose friends if you stay too long. I wanted them to feel good about me."

But he did not want to hang out downtown: "I have pride." About addiction he said, "I was lost and confused. Addiction is hiding from everything, blocking everything out, whatever it is, it gets you out of reality."



Joseph shoplifted during those years, got caught and went to jail. Eventually he was caught with cocaine and ended up in prison, at Columbia River Correctional Institute. "The first successful help I got was at CODA (a treatment and recovery program in Portland). I only went because I could get out of jail. I want to give credit to the United States Mission here in Portland, too. That program really helped me.

"Every time I went to jail, I returned to God. You get a chance to look at yourself and your mind starts to clear out. I started connecting with some of the church that I had learned as a kid. We went to Sunday school - it gave me a foundation. I don't call myself a Mormon, but I am a Christian.

"When I first went to jail in 1996,

Marion County Jail had services every night of the week and I was the only guy who went to all of them. I read the Bible from cover to cover."

Joseph's life story is complicated, with many ups and downs. But now, he has been clean and sober for 18 months, and is in a methadone program. And after waiting for nine months and with the help of Northwest Pilot Project, he is living in his own apartment. He is very clear about the three keys to finding his way out of homelessness: treatment, spirituality and the help you get from others.

"You can't do it alone!" Joseph pounds on his knee for emphasis. "I wouldn't be able to be clean now if I hadn't opened my eyes spiritually and opened up to treatment."