

Stahlman Beekeeping Notes for 2022

**Beekeeping in Western
North Carolina**



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As I begin to share information this week, I am in far Western North Carolina learning a little more about the state. I am on the border of NC and Tennessee. This is mountain country. I am mixing vacation with beekeeping.

I believe most states have unique beekeeping possibilities. Judi and I stayed in Sylva, N.C. located near the Cherokee Indian Reservation. It is a 5-hour drive from Raleigh.

I have two goals making this trip. The first was to get out of the heat of eastern N.C. - temperatures here are cooler and more enjoyable when it comes to working bees. And while looking at beekeeping opportunities, I can visit and enjoy its special geology and history. One hobby I have is rock collecting and this is paradise for rock hounds. The history part was taking in the outdoor presentation of "Unto These Hills" and visiting Cherokee county winding up the visit by taking the train from Bryson City on a 52-mile journey thru valleys and a look at the Great Smoky Mountains.

But when I travel there is always the beekeeping part of the trip. Many years ago, I had a chance to team up with Billy Engle and B.J. Weeks to keep bees in Northern Georgia. Mountain beekeeping is challenging because there are few level places to keep bees. Most good locations are already established by local beekeepers. Pulling a trailer or driving a truck up winding mountain roads can be challenging.

Many of the locals recognize the value of individuals wanting to place bees on ground they own and expect to be rewarded with some of the honey produced by the bees. These people are savvy. And many of the good sites have bees. This creates an interesting issue with anyone wanting to place bees near someone who already has bees nearby. Bears might not be as big of a problem as a human problem.

The sourwood is in full bloom this week in North Carolina. It is not hard to see hives of bees located in desirable locations – because of the lay of the land, it is easier to find those close to roads because getting off the roads in this area is not easy.

Sourwood trees do not cover the mountains. The foliage here is made up of a number of tree varieties. I was told 141 different species.

I was told by some that sourwood trees do not produce honey high on the mountains but rather well in the valleys and lower elevations. All I can say is that you usually can't find locations high up on mountain tops where sourwood might grow even if they did produce nectar. It is a fact that sourwood honey is a crop dependable on weather and climate conditions.

In 1998 I had bees in Rayburn County, Georgia that did quite well. I piggy-backed bees with Billy Engle and Jessy McCurdy getting 2 barrels of pure sourwood for myself. We had about 350 hives between us. They shared with me that some years are a wash out and not to expect too much. But luck was with me. I didn't have to find the locations, I just put my bees on a trailer and followed it to the mountains of northern Georgia. That doesn't qualify me as a sourwood honey producer. Moving bees, putting up bear fences and finding a location to put the hives is hard work. It is done well before the trees bloom!

The sourwood tree is native to eastern North America following generally the Appalachian Mountains from Pennsylvania to Alabama. Scientifically, it is called *Oxydendrum arboretum* and common as the sorrel tree. The nectar from the tree is often mixed with nectar from other sources during the honey flow resulting in various colors of honey being sold as sourwood honey.

The flavor of sourwood honey is remarkable and one of the most distinctive of all honey sold. Its bloom only last for three weeks. Its honey is ultra-light amber and adds flavor to other nectar sources gathered with it. Beekeepers that harvest pure sourwood honey do so by placing supers on hives (empty drawn comb frames in supers) and remove the supers immediately after the honey flow is over. Thus, the extracted honey is not mixed with wildflower honey that is gathered a bit earlier or later.

Beekeepers in this region have an abundance of nectar producing plants. Spring honey flows consist of wildflower and later the tulip poplar flow. This honey can range from light to dark when tulip poplar honey is extracted with the earlier honey. Dark colored sourwood is usually a result of being extracted from comb that contains some tulip poplar honey.

Generally, the following honey produced in this area are holly, dandelion, black locust, raspberry, persimmon, basswood, sweet clover and tulip poplar. Many wild flowers later in the season would include goldenrod and asters. Keep in mind that all of this may not be located in all areas of the mountains.

This area is a little like the finger lake region of New York. From a visitor's perspective, I wish I had bees here now!

I visited several beekeepers I would like to thank for their hospitality. First was David Kirkland of Appalachian Apiaries. He manages the largest bee business in the area. He told me they have 1,300 hives of bees on sourwood. There are a lot of beekeepers in Macon County-- several I was told with about 100 hives each. His company sells bee equipment,

supplies and honey. At my visit they had just extracted raspberry and wild flower and were planning to take off the sourwood honey soon.

The other great contact became more of a story than sourwood. I wanted to know what it is like to get sourwood high up in the mountains. The name Doug Lambercht came up and I gave him a call. I didn't have a clue about him. He did invite me up – way up on the side of Cullowhee Mountain. Instructions were something like this: Turn on Cullowhee Mountain Road from Rt. 107. Go thru a couple of stop lights and turn right on Old Mt. Road. After about 7 miles you will come to a pole barn with a lot of trucks around it. Continue to the split in the road turn hard right. The road will be gravel. Follow that road for about 2 miles when you will come to another split in the road. On the left you will see a sign that says no trespassing. Turn onto this forest service road for a couple of miles. It will take you to my place.



This is a view from my truck as I drove this mountain road. The road provide no place to pull off if another vehicle was coming down the road. To the left was a shear drop-off.



I was welcomed warmly by a guy that lives on the edge of nowhere. He bought land on this mountain side, built his home and some outbuildings, and gets into town maybe a couple times a month. He keeps bees but more than that he has many other interests.



This is a view of his land looking out the only turn around place that I saw in the approximately two miles from his neighbors house.

The white trees growing near and around his property are sourwood trees in full bloom. It didn't make any difference where I looked, there were sourwood trees.

Our talk took on a flavor of independence from the world outside. He more or less described living there as: health, wealth, and time.

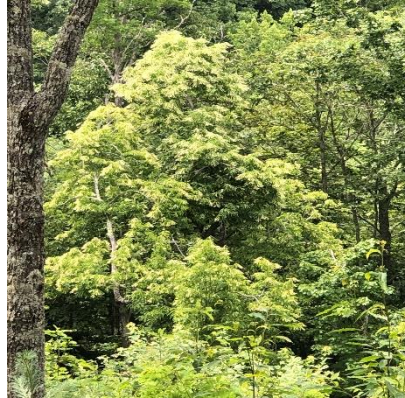
The sourwood trees were tall – maybe 60 to 100 foot giants. He explained that his honey flow came a bit later than the sourwood flow in the gaps and valleys below. Some years are better than others depending on climate conditions.

Doug is easy going and talks about health and the value of Wasabi which he grows in these high mountain plots. He is an expert and has a web site: www.realwasabi.com. He has also developed an interesting bee hive. I will share more of its design in later issues – it doesn't fit my Langstroth prejudices – but it offers an alternative to it.

Here are some of the photos I took of bee hives and other things in the mountains.



Yes, these are bee hives looking down from the road. I could not get closer. They had bees flying but no supers. I don't know if they had supers on them earlier. Some sourwood honey was being harvested when I visited the area.



And these were found behind a local storage building not far from Franklin, N.C. These bees did not have far to go to get sourwood nectar! Just across the road were sourwood trees. Real sourwood honey is very light in color. The honey supers above were deeps. They hold about 60 pounds of honey each. What more can I say?