2026 Stahlman Bee Notes

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The sourwood flow is over in western North Carolina and it illustrates something important about making money with bees. Those moving bees to get honey are never guaranteed a good crop. Regardless of the plant, crop failure is always a risk. The sourwood flow this year was uniquely good. It is unique that most of North Carolina is in a drought and one area really produced a honey fantastic honey crop. Why did the sourwood honey flow go so well this year?

Sourwood (oxydendrum arboreum) is the scientific name for the **sourwood tree**, and is called sorrel tree or lily-of-the-valley tree. It is the only species in the genus *Oxydendrum* and is native to the eastern United States, especially the Appalachian Mountains.

According to the literature published 100 years ago (*American Honey Plants* by Frank Pellett) Many regard it as the finest honey produced in America. I would share that view.
It is also unique because it blooms at a time when bees have time to build large bee populations to gather the nectar – often 75 to 100+ pounds per hive. Another feature is it is considered a variety honey – that is a honey not mixed with other nectar sources. To get the best sourwood honey, beekeepers place honey supers on bees just before the honey flow and remove supers immediately after the honey flow.

As with many honey crops, good crops depend on favorable weather conditions both during and before blooming period. Weather in the mountains (higher elevations) often have rain or fog and cooler temperatures which produces iffy weather. This reduces the harvest time for the blooming period. This year was warm with adequate early rain. It's also worth noting that sourwood honey is inherently unpredictable. Many experienced mountain beekeepers say a truly exceptional sourwood crop only comes along every few years because the bloom period is so short and very dependent on weather.

Flavor

Sourwood honey is prized for its distinctive flavor profile:

- Rich but delicate sweetness
- Floral aroma
- Notes often described as caramel, butter, warm spice, and sometimes a hint of anise
- Very clean finish with no bitterness

Its balanced taste makes it popular for eating straight from the spoon as well as pairing with foods.

Appearance

- Color: Light amber to extra light amber
- Clarity: Usually very clear when freshly extracted
- Crystallization: Slow compared with many other honeys

This is a color patch showing thru a jar of sourwood honey with a white paper backdrop. The honey is light and often if one puts a jar of it over an image, the image can be clearly seen thru the honey jar. Several beekeepers in the Raleigh area take bees to the mountains and will have sourwood honey available. Because this variety of honey is restricted to a specific area, it will be expensive and not normally available outside the production region.

While I am at it, I was asked by a friend a question which I share with you**: How smart are honey bees**? I knew that honey bees do remarkable things but I had to goggle this question. Then I was introduced to A.I. to get a better answer. Wow! I used three sources to get the answer he was looking for. So much for dogs and cats.
Many of you most likely use A.I. but I am new to it. I used Google Gemini, ChatGPT, and Claude by Anthropic. These sites are going to put Master Beekeepers out to pasture. I may never write another article without using it.

Dogs and cats are not as smart as honey bees according to A.I. In fact, any question about anything can be asked – even very detailed questions and the answers are just second's away. Phone Aps have now been created to allow any person interested in honey bees to get answers to their questions almost instantly. **No Master Beekeeper is needed to diagnose a perceived problem or teach a class on beekeeping. It is all out there in the cloud.**
My search revealed this: I asked these three A.I. sites to answer this question**:** What are the 10 most intelligent animals or insects? In one, honey bees were listed as the 5th most intelligent. Another had them 9th. Ants even made it in the top 10 as well as Chimpanzees, Orangutans, Dolphins, elephants, pigs, some bird varieties. Border collies where listed as honorable mentions. Try it out yourself – any question! If any published information has been recorded in the cloud, it is available.

I am a book collector and recently I bought an old book on eBay. It was called *Secrets of Bee-Keeping* by K.P. Kidder forth edition published in 1868. Not only was I able to find information about the author such as his first name Kimball but a complete reproduction of his Patented bee hive No. 28,871 patented June 26, 1860 and a lot of information about him personally. This book has some very unique information in it that I am going to try. For example, we are dealing with robbing right now. Kidder mentions a bee catcher which was really a trap to gather robbing bees – yes, bait it with some honey and bees entered the hive trap and could not get out. He moved the trap hive some distance away and a few days later, introduced a new queen and he had another hive. The special trap door on his hive is illustrated on the patent as fig. 4 & fig 5. I was just thinking that someone could set this up in my neighbors yard and walk away with four or five pounds of bees. This is a thought that I never considered before!

I will be reading his book and may share other Secrets of Bee-Keeping with you.

Heat warning -- If you can, work your bees when temperatures are not at the mid-day high.