



# Liquid Sunshine

BEEKEEPING, A CENTURIES-OLD HOBBY, YIELDS MAGICAL, GOLDEN BOUNTY

BY ERIC FRANCIS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA BLANCETT

Bees swarm around broken bits of honeycomb, trying to protect the liquid gold that's being stolen from them.



**D**ave Ragan has 300,000 daughters. They live in boxes in his backyard. He only feeds them twice a year, and every summer and fall he steals what is most precious to them.

A clever little beast is *Apis mellifera*. The Western (or European) honeybee is, these days, almost entirely dependent upon humans to provide it a home, though it furnishes the place to its own taste. But it's a fair trade, because *A. mellifera* pays the rent by pollinating some fifteen billion dollars worth of American crops every year — including all of the almonds and ninety percent of the apples, blueberries, carrots, cranberries, onions ... you get the picture.

But you just don't find *A. mellifera* in the wild anymore, not in Arkansas or anywhere else. Sure, the occasional swarm will turn up, maybe lodge itself inside someone's wall or hole up in an old tree trunk. But disease, parasites, and an as-yet unsolved syndrome called Colony Collapse Disorder (wherein whole hives' worth of bees just ... vanish) have all but rid us of wild honeybees. And that puts an awful lot of pressure on us humans to be good landlords.

Fortunately, there's another incentive for people to keep *A. mellifera* around. After all, they're called honeybees for a reason.



Back to Ragan and his "little girls," as he calls the bees that thrive in five hives shielded by a tall hedge on the back of his property in Alexander, close to the good-sized garden that was the impetus for his hobby.

"I got bees for the pollination and didn't care about the honey," Ragan said as he donned a white beekeeper's suit. "Now I'm all about the honey, and the pollination is secondary."

He learned his craft about five years ago from the man he calls his mentor, Houston Simmons, whom Ragan met by the expediency of seeing a "Honey for Sale" sign outside the man's house and simply knocking on Simmons's door.

"He was just as nice as you can possibly be," Ragan said of the man who not only invited him in but took him under his wing, teaching him how to build hive boxes, capture swarms, tend bees, and harvest their bounty.

Ragan bought his first hive from Simmons, and not a week later it swarmed, resulting in what was basically a buy-one-get-one-free deal. Over the years, he's added new hives as the existing ones grew so big they also produced swarms, which he captured; now he's pretty close to his limit, Ragan says.

"If I get too many hives, I'll sell some," he said, then zipped close the fine mesh veil that allows him to see without getting stung.

Looking something like an earthbound astronaut, Ragan walked through the gateway in the *Elaeagnus* hedge and into his apiary. (The honeybee's Latin name, *Apis*, is applied to the formal terms for all things bee-related: Bee yards are apiaries, beekeeping is apiculture, and a beekeeper is an apiarist.) He's armed with a smoker, a hand-held metal canister with a small bellows, in which he burns straw or burlap; and a hive tool, which any weekend handyman would recognize as a small pry bar. He's also brought along a cart with a couple of empty supers, the topless and bottomless boxes from which the hives are constructed.

On their side of the equation, the 300,000 bees have 300,000 stingers. They die if they use them, but there's not a girl among them who isn't ready to give her life protecting queen and hive. Ragan holds out his heavy canvas glove to show how tiny stingers are stuck all over the back of it, visible proof of the dedication and ferocity of these tiny defenders.

Harvesting honey is sticky, messy, sweaty business. Prying open the hives, Ragan sorts through the individual frames — there are nine in each super — upon which the bees build the wax honeycombs. Some combs are open-topped, either empty or filled with honey that isn't yet ready to eat. Others sport dark brown caps — these are brood cells, where the next generation of bees is growing.

But some frames are capped with golden wax and bulging as though ready to burst. These are transferred to the empty supers, twenty frames in all before Ragan is done checking the hives. Not as heavy a haul as he'd expected for this time of year, but he anticipates making another withdrawal later this summer, after the bees have had a chance to finish what they've started.

Ragan hauls the cart toward the workshop behind his house, still suited up out of respect for the dozens of bees that follow along, intent on salvaging as much of the honey as possible.

"I just keep doing it because, to me, it's fascinating," Ragan says through the gauzy veil. "I can sit there in front of a hive and just watch them come and go for hours."



"You're not female," someone wryly observes as I find a seat at the Lady Beekeepers of Arkansas meeting.

So noted. I'm here to meet Nao Ueda, who's one of beekeeping's evangelists in central Arkansas. Actually, that's a bit of an oxymoron — if you ever



meet a  
beekeeper,  
chances are they'll  
try hard to convert you.

The Lady Beekeepers is only one of many groups across the state where enthusiasts gather to swap stories and suggestions, the largest of which is the Arkansas Beekeepers Association. Most have some kind of web presence, and all welcome newcomers to their meetings, which to the uninitiated might resemble indoctrination sessions, the level of enthusiasm being so high.

While men make up the majority of beekeepers, gender roles are reversed within the hives. Worker bees are all female, as is the queen, of course. Male bees — drones — are good for only two things: mating with the queen and eating. Some of the lady beekeepers chuckle with glee as they describe how they kill off any drone they find. After all, if more drones are needed, the queen will simply lay some unfertilized eggs, which result in male bees.

No wonder Charles Butler's early-eighteenth-century treatise on bees was called "The Feminine Monarchy."

This night, about two dozen women (and three drones) have gathered at the Sixth and Izard Church of Christ in downtown Little Rock to hear Dr. Yong Park, an entomologist at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, wax eloquent about the remarkable physiology of bees. Members Debra Stansel and Shelia Farley talk fervently about their recent trip to Italy and all of the bee imagery they found, including within the Vatican. Laminated cards are handed around with a reminder of what's on tap in the hive that month. ("June: The bee populations are high, and hive activity is bustling. If the weather is favorable, nectar and pollen will continue to be brought in vigorously.")

In the midst of all this, Ueda drops into the seat next to me. Young and peppy, she almost immediately inquires if I've ever worked with bees before; I say that while I'm a complete amateur, I have a grasp on the basics and even own the requisite white beekeeper's suit.

This makes her very happy. She wanted to make sure I wasn't planning to show up in jeans or other dark clothing. Beekeeping and dark colors don't mix.

"Bees hate the color black, so we Asians get it bad," she explains. "My first bee sting was on my head."





A few early stings to the head never diminished Nao Ueda's enthusiasm for beekeeping.

In her backyard apiary about a week later, Ueda is smiling an awful lot for someone who once had a bee go all Homeland Security in her hair. That jab to the noggin clearly did nothing to deter her enthusiasm for beekeeping, which she is undertaking behind the downtown Little Rock home she shares with her partner, lawyer Eddy Moore.

In fact, Ueda has transformed the entire backyard into a little urban farm, with vegetables in raised beds and a pen full of chickens and ducks, along with her two beehives. She'd also like to keep goats and collect rainwater in barrels, but both of those things are currently prohibited under Little Rock's city codes, something Ueda is working to get changed.

(Someone is probably thinking right now: "Beehives in the city? There oughta be a law!" Well, there is a law — in this instance, case law from the Arkansas Supreme Court, which back in 1889 ruled in *Clark vs. Arkadelphia* that "Neither the keeping, owning, or raising of bees is, in itself, a nuisance." While a city or the state can establish regulations regarding beekeeping — limiting the number of hives based on lot size, for instance, or requiring registration of hives with the state Plant Board — the keeping of bees cannot be summarily outlawed.)

Ueda, who's thirty-one, has lived in Arkansas since she was eleven. She left the state to attend college at Georgetown University but returned because, as she put it, "you can't keep chickens and bees in downtown Washington, D.C." And she's pretty serious about her chickens and bees. She works for Audubon Arkansas and helped start the Arkansas Sustainability Network; she also serves on Little Rock's Sustainability Commission, and



Dava Ragan has 300,000 bees in his backyard apiary. Here, he checks the frames on which bees build their comb to see if the honey is ready to be harvested.

has presented workshops on urban homesteading.

In the shaded corner that backs up to a fire station, Ueda uses her smoker and a brush with long, soft bristles to encourage the bees to move aside as she inspects the frames.

"Each time you check the bees, you usually kill about three hundred on average," she says, carefully replacing a super on top of a hive. "You squash them, you smoke them — they really hate that."

Her No. 2 hive is abuzz with activity; the front is covered by a thick layer of bees, their rippling movement recalling the shimmer of heat coming off pavement. The frames within the topmost super are full of honey, which she'll probably leave for the bees to feed on during the winter.

"I should be more vigilant about getting the honey out," she admits, "but I just like playing with them."

Ueda uses Italian queens, which produce broods that are known for being gentle. Of course, "gentle" is a relative term when you're stirring up a bunch of bees. But the Italians aren't as aggressive as some other varieties, making it a little easier for the beekeeper and any bystanders.

"This queen has been very good," Ueda says as she closes the hive. "She's about a year old."

The No. 1 hive, however, isn't as robust. The queen there arrived via mail order less than a month before. The previous hive fell victim to wax moths, one of a number of problems beekeepers face. A strong, healthy hive can often fight off the moths or other intruders like the small hive beetle, but parasites like tracheal and Varroa mites and the fowlbrood spore can devastate a hive. They're all part of the beekeepers' many worries.

On the other hand, Ueda knows her girls have plenty to eat. Her vegetable garden benefits from

the bees as much as it benefits them, and she also has many flowers, herbs, and trees that are good producers of nectar.

"These are black locusts," she says of the trees shading her apiary. "They're native [to Arkansas], and bees love them."

Ueda's never heard a complaint from her neighbors, though she tries to work the hives at times when people aren't out and about. Because bees fly at the height of any obstacle around their hives, the six-foot board fence generally keeps them above head-level. Plus, she believes that people understand her bees are doing good work in the neighborhood.

"They just generally don't seem to bother people," Ueda said. "I just do it to get more bees out downtown."



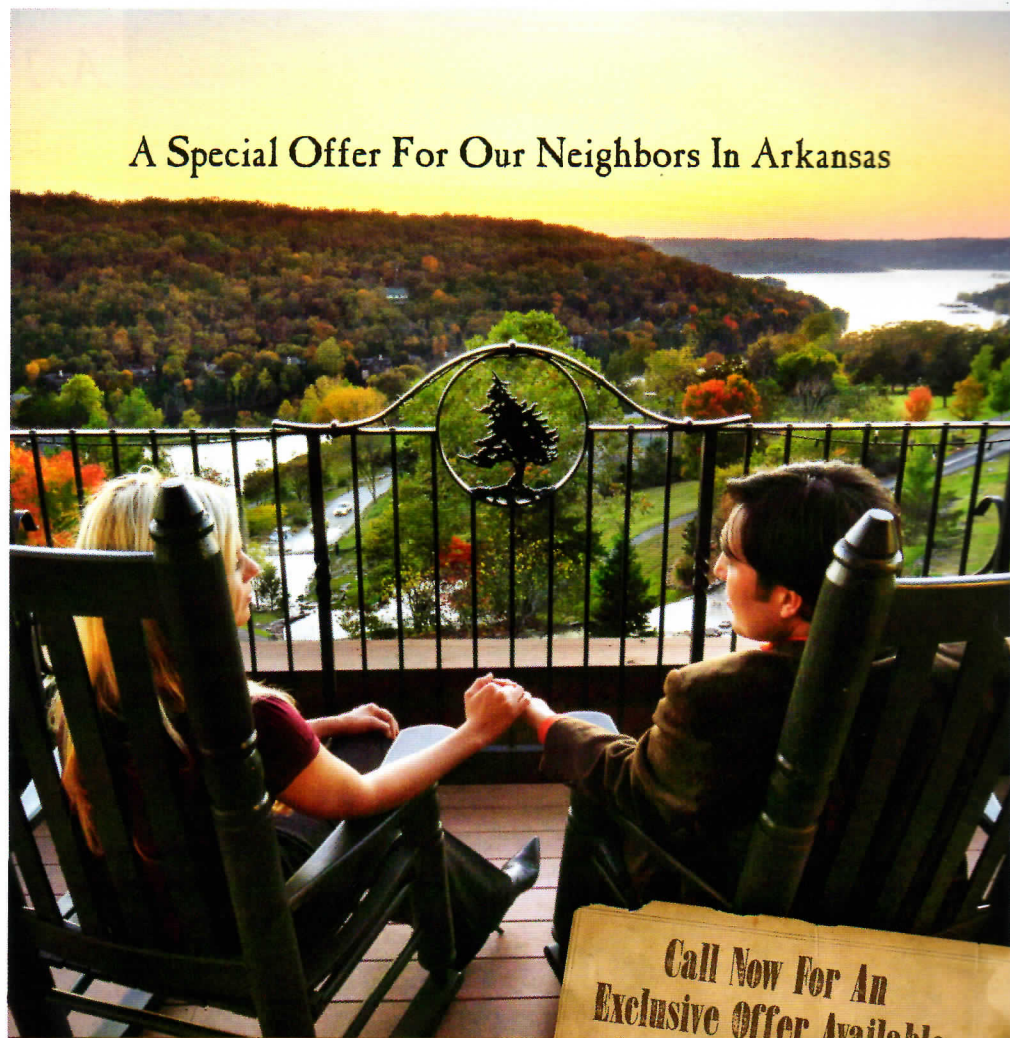
Back in Alexander, Ragan has transferred the honey-heavy supers (each weighs about thirty pounds) to his workshop.

"I built this for woodworking and my beer-making," he says of the spacious, air-conditioned steel building. "I ended up filling most of it with beekeeping supplies. All of the beer stuff got moved."

Once you get the frames out of the hives, extracting the honey is a simple, if time-consuming, exercise. Using a broad-bladed knife with an electric heating element in it, Ragan skims the caps off of the honeycomb, letting the bits fall into a perforated plastic tray so any extra honey can dribble into the bin below.

Then four frames go into his honey extractor, itself a marvel of eighteenth-century technology.





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It's a large metal bucket with a wire mesh basket inside, attached to a crank handle. Turn the handle, the basket spins, and by the magic of centrifugal force, the honey is expelled and runs down to the bottom of the bucket. From there the honey passes through a fine filter (to remove things like bits of wax and the inevitable bee parts) into the collection bucket. Flip the frames around and repeat, then once again.

The whole process takes more than an hour, but the payoff is ... well, the only word for it is intense. Setting the collection bucket on top of a workbench, Ragan holds a quart Mason jar beneath the spout at its base and opens the valve.

Out streams liquid sunshine.

The raw honey from his bees' spring efforts is a light golden color. It is light and headily sweet, the very taste of purity itself.

"We both eat it every morning," Ragan says of himself and his wife of thirteen years, Cynthia. I put it in my coffee. It has distinctly helped us both with our allergies."

Today's haul is a couple of gallons; with all his hives producing well, Ragan says he can expect to collect twenty gallons in a good year. Some of that goes to friends and family, but he always makes sure to stock away enough to get them through the year.

At least, that's the plan.

"We ran out this year for the first time. I had to buy some from Hot Springs Village," Ragan said, a tinge of regret in his voice.

"It's just not the same," he added, now with a hint of fervor, watching the glass jar slowly fill with the golden treasure of 300,000 bees. "Once you've tasted this kind of honey, everything else just doesn't taste this good."

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