Rethinking Colony Location and Hive Protection - by Joe Lewis

Principles: Like the three principles of real estate, making honey and keeping bees has at least three rules: location, location and location. Well, it may sound funny, but it is not. This is serious. Where you place your hives and how they are protected can make a huge difference in your degree of success in beekeeping. Well-placed hives can "make it or break it" when owning, observing, working and profiting from your bees. A good nectar source is one of the essentials of making a honey crop and not all locations are blessed with these sources. If you are consistently ***not*** making a honey crop, despite all the best beekeeping practices that you can bring to bear, consider keeping your bees in a new location.

Your OUT-yard: We think we have limited choices about where to place our bees, but are we really limited? We all can have another place or two to keep bees besides our own backyard. All we have to do is ask our friends, relatives, co-workers, etc if they know of a suitable place or have contacts with a few acres nearby. Or we can go with a jar of honey in hand and knock on some doors --- down the road, around the corner, up-county, etc. And we need to do this because each of us needs at least one out-yard, even if we only keep one or two hives of bees there. I think an outyard location 1 or 2 miles from the home yard is a key to colony management and increase as you always will need to move a split when controlling swarming. Similarly, you will can most easily use a nuc from a remote location when making a combine or requeening with a nuc (and new queen). The advantages of an out-yard could also include reducing competition for limited resources in our Harford-Cecil post-nectar flow period after June 15th and keeping your bees out of sight of your neighbors and away from your children's play area! The optimum location for an outyard might be between your home and work, or between home and your mother-in-law's home, or any other place you visit regularly since that will make it convenient to check on it while on your normal travels.

Apiary Location Selection: Plenty has been written about selecting an apiary location but my personal favorite is the apiary discussion in the 1920 edition of ABC & XYZ of Bee Culture. A. I. Root and his son E. R. Root write extensively in this volume about their successes with apiary locations and techniques, but more importantly they discuss their failures. They believed, as many others since believe, that windbreaks were key with the optimum windbreak consisting of an entire orchard or trees on at least 3 sides. But they found that solid fence walls could cause the winter wind to whip up and then down onto the opposite side causing all the hives in the 3rd row to die out! Microclimates, natural or man-made are important. The Roots declare page 58 of the 1920 book:

"A good windbreak is now regarded, for winter protection, as important (and some think more important) for outdoor wintered bees, as packing and double-walled hives."

Placing your hives out away structures, fence lines and tree lines is the wrong thing to do. But if you can't select that kind of protection, build it for your hives! Stack bales of straw behind your hives (available for free after the Halloween maze is no longer needed at your local farm outlet). Or circle a group of hives with a short metal sheet 12 – 14 inches

high to break up the wind and keep it out of hive entrances. This technique was pictured and described in detail in a recent ABJ issue. If none of this is possible, move the hives.

Using Structures: Holley Bishop wrote an excellent book *"Robbing the Bees"* that gives some insight into the historical use of structures for winter protection. She gives us some details of the record of travelers in our area during the late 1600s and through the 1700s who recorded their beehive observations. They described repeatedly seeing "six or seven beehives located on the South side of the (colonists') houses". Placing hives against the south wall of a major structure can increase a hive's survivability partly due the significant windbreak created. Additionally the radiant heat absorbed by the structure and reflected back onto the hive can add to the direct sun radiation received. In the case of stone structures, the radiation can continue even after the sun goes down!!

Cellars and Barns:

Some of the big beekeepers out in Idaho put their bees to bed for 3 or 4 months before going into almond pollination. They do this by placing their bees in refrigerated potato warehouses held at 45 degrees F. We can reduce the effect of long cold windy winters in our part of NE Maryland by putting our bees in cellars too, if we could find a cellar! As a compromise, unused sheds and barns could make a big difference. 2 years ago I moved 11 hives into a horse shed just for the period Feb and early March, as I saw the forecast for an extended period of extreme cold. Of these eleven I only lost 1 hive deadout so I know it can work. On the few days I thought it would get warm enough for the bees to go out for cleansing flights, I opened the top and bottom doors of the horse stable and gave the bees outside access.

Pink Panther Helping Bees: My system employed this year was a ventilated inner cover (front facing slot) with 2-inch piece of Corning pink insulation on top of the inner cover, and a migratory cover on top of that. All secured with a quick release strap to make sure nothing blows away during a wind storm. Preliminary results look very good with a January inspection revealing only a few dead outs. For the hives that were found in early January to be exceptionally light, instead of the insulation on top of the inner cover, I added an inverted gallon jar with heavy syrup, a pair of empty medium supers (or a deep plus a small spacer) and then added the 2-inch insulation board on top of that, and the migratory or telescoping lid. In a couple of cases the syrup had crystallized and clogged the holes, so repeated attention is needed to make sure the bees have access if they want it! When I opened the top of one of these and put in my bare hand I could notice the warmth of the hive coming from inside (evidence they were already holding some brood at the required 94 degrees F).