



# plan bee

With the pollinators' numbers in decline, more than 200 of our neighbors are on a mission to protect the secret life of bees

BY CHANTAL ALLAM | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NINA MERKLINA

**J**ohn Strickland became a beekeeper as a simple favor for his neighbor. “[My neighbor] had a hive of bees and was getting up in age,” he recalls. “He told me one day in the late 1970s that if he ever had to leave and couldn’t come back, he wanted me to take his bees.”

Two weeks later, the man went to a nursing home. “I went ▶



**John Strickland doesn't wear a protective suit when he goes to tend his 23 hives at Busy Bee Farm. It gets way too hot, he says, and he doesn't mind bee stings.**



**“BEES WILL TEACH YOU THAT YOU DON’T KNOW NOTHING. I STILL DON’T KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT BEES. THEY AMAZE ME EVERY TIME I GO INTO MY HIVE. THERE’S ALWAYS SOMETHING DIFFERENT.”**

over and got his bees and brought them here, and that’s how I got started.”

Now, nearly four decades later, the lanky, 74-year-old with a head full of snow-white hair and shaggy beard is known around town as the “Bee Man.” On most days, he can be found in a white T-shirt and jeans, tending to his hives at his **Busy Bee Farm**, just off Dewitt Smith Road in rural Pittsboro.

He’s also one of the driving forces behind the **Chatham County Beekeepers’ Association (CCBA)** which has been working to support local beekeeping since 1976. He once served a 10-year stint as its president.

Back at the beginning, John, who joined the group a few years after it formed, remembers beekeeping as a relatively straightforward business or hobby. But things have changed.

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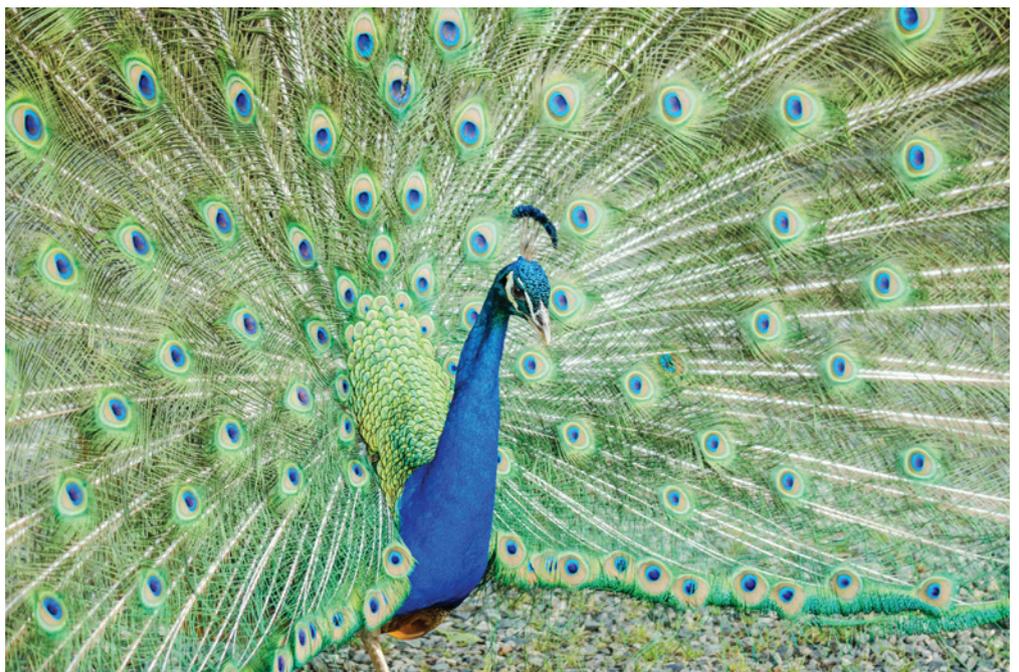


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These days, bees are increasingly coming under threat by pests and a phenomenon known as colony collapse disorder (CCD).

“It’s very frustrating. I lost 42 hives last year,” he says. “I got down to eight hives by the end of December. You do your best to build up your bees and all of a sudden, they’re gone. The whole colony just disappears. Now I’m back up to 23 hives. [CCD is] a mystery, and they don’t know what’s causing it.”

With the threat critical, the nearly 200-strong CCBA group has been doubling down on efforts to rebuild the local bee population. Its first front: educating the community. It holds monthly meetings with guest speakers, an 8-week “beekeeping school” every other year and regular demonstrations at schools and farmers markets.

The group also maintains five hives at the **Central Carolina Community College Student Farm** in Pittsboro.

John, who has numerous children and grandchildren in the area, is often seen on the speaking circuit with a demo hive in hand. It has become a personal crusade.

“If we didn’t have honey bees, we’d lose a third of the food we eat,” he says. “If I can get only one out of a class [who] wants to be a beekeeper, I’ve done something useful.” **CM**

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**INTERESTED IN BEEKEEPING? SOME TIPS:**

**Do your homework**

Read books, watch YouTube videos, join your local association, take a course. "Learn everything you can about beekeeping before you decide to get your bees," says John. "With a bit of knowledge, you have a better chance of success at it."

**Find a mentor**

Ask permission to shadow them for a year, a complete cycle of beekeeping. Get hands-on experience on everything from splitting hives to dealing with pests. "At the end of that year, you're going to know if you want to be a beekeeper or not," he says.

**Keep an open mind**

If you go into beekeeping and think you're going to be a success, you're going to be a failure, says John. "Bees will teach you that you don't know nothing. I still don't know everything about bees. They amaze me every time I go into my hive. There's always something different."

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

about the CCBA, the group meets the third Thursday of the month at 7 p.m. in the Chatham County Agriculture Building Auditorium, 65 East Chatham Street, Pittsboro. Contact the CCBA Board at [ccba1976@googlegroups.com](mailto:ccba1976@googlegroups.com), or go to [www.chathambeekeepers.wordpress.com](http://www.chathambeekeepers.wordpress.com).