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an interview with the queen

Queen Honey Bee



Honeybees have been frequently in the news of late. The media attention has raised not only the level of awareness of the honey bee's plight, but also an interest in honey bees in general. Many people know little or nothing about the honey bee and its existence. To expand the public's general knowledge, I have requested an interview with the Italian Queen Bee to glean factual information for my fellow gardeners about "honey bee society."

Question: Your Majesty, would you please provide us with a general overview of your "Honey Bee Society?"

Response: Honey bees are truly social insects. We live in an intricately governed society that rivals human society in complexity and internal cohesion. The term "social insect" was coined by entomologists to describe insects that live cooperatively in colonies and exhibit a division of labor among distinct castes. Only a few insect groups are classified as truly social. All termites (Isoptera) and some Hymenoptera (including honey bees, all ants, stingless bees, bumble bees, and some wasps) are truly social insects.

Our society consists of three types or castes of individuals: the Queen, the Drone, and the Worker. Each plays a different, but critically important, role in our society within each colony (beehive).

Question: How is each role different?

Response: Each individual has well-defined roles in order for the colony to survive and none can live on their own. The Queen is the "principal" of each colony. Only one Queen lives in each colony on a permanent basis. She is the only female in the colony with fully developed ovaries. Her role is to perpetuate the species and she does so by laying thousands of eggs during her lifetime. She maintains the social order of the community (through certain secretions produced from glands in her body).

The Drone is the male of our society and there may be dozens in a colony. Drones are the honey bee version of what humans call a "couch potato"—they do not help care for the beehive, the brood, or collect food. Their only purpose is to mate with a virgin honey bee queen and thus fertilize her eggs.

The Workers are sterile, female honey bees and make up the majority of the colony population which can total 40,000 to 80,000 members during peak population. The Workers perform all of the day-to-day chores involved in maintaining the colony. The human expression of "busy as a bee" is based upon one of the many admirable qualities of the Workers.

Question: Your Majesty, you stated that the Workers perform all the day-to-day chores within the colony. Please explain?

Response: For about the first month after her birth, a Worker remains within the confines of the beehive. She progresses through a series of assignments as she ages. For example, shortly after birth she will begin cleaning out the cells in the honeycomb from which she and other workers have recently emerged in preparation of a new egg being deposited in the cell by the Queen. She performs the general housekeeping duties of removing dead bees and debris from the beehive, repairing broken honeycomb, and making the beehive weather proof by sealing breaks in the outer shell of the beehive with a material known as propolis.

She's a "nanny" responsible for feeding and caring for the developing "baby bees." Workers serve as attendants to the Queen who is unable to feed, groom, or clean up after herself. They help control the temperature of the beehive by fanning the interior to remove heat and humidity; they transport and store food brought into the beehive from the "foraging bees"; and performs guard duty at the beehive entrance to defend it against intruders.

Once a Worker reaches about 3-4 weeks of age she enters the "foraging" period of her life span, gathering pollen and nectar to replenish the colony's food stores. This is dangerous duty and many of my subjects are seriously injured during foraging or never return to the beehive at all. So, you see we each have a role in the colony, each is important, and has its place in the continuation of the species.

This concludes my interview with the Queen Honey Bee. We hope this helps to expand the public's knowledge and interest about honey bees.

Her Favorites

Favorite Society: The honey bee society! The Queen suggests that we talk to local beekeepers, and read - there are many great beekeeping books available. She would definitely recommend *Langstroth's Hive and the Honey-Bee: The Classic Beekeeper's Manual* by Rev. L. L. Langstroth and published in the 1850s. His principles still apply even with today's modern beekeeping methodologies. His in-depth look at the details of the honeybee society and beekeeping will be very enlightening. Not only was he a very knowledgeable beekeeper, he designed the beehive we call home!

Favorite Movie: Our Society has been abuzz about the recent screen release entitled "Bee Movie." There were plenty of letters to the editor in *The Swarm* (our daily newspaper). I guess we should not be surprised that the movie did not follow the real science of Honey Bee Society, but your interview will help overcome that. Sure, the main actor is an animated bee by the name of Barry B. Benson but excuse me....that's a male name and even though it's voiced-over by humorist/actor Jerry Seinfeld, the ladies in my colony did not find much humor as our male bees do not collect nectar nor pollinate flowers! Did you also notice that Barry B. Benson's male friend deservedly stung a mean-spirited human? Excuse me....male bees do not have stingers! Did you notice that all bee actors were provided with only four legs....excuse me again, we demand our other two legs! Did I mention that "Bee Movie" made only a fleeting reference to me, the Queen Bee! I could go on and on with "Excuse Me" references but I am the Queen Bee and wisdom must prevail above all else. In spite of the many apiarian inaccuracies, if this animated honey bee movie inspires people to live green and care more about our rapidly disappearing society then it serves a greater purpose for your Human Society and my Honey Bee Society.