

The Zest S7 E10 Transcript - Beekeeper Derek Lewis

Derek Lewis: [00:00:00] We all love honey, but in reality, these far greater function in society is their pollination. They are sophisticated little creatures. They won't go any further than they have to.

Dalia Colón: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is the Zest, citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the sunshine state when it comes to educating the public about pollination. Today's guest is one busy bee.

Today we're getting the buzz on beekeeping from St. Petersburg resident Derek Lewis. The South African native and third generation beekeeper is active in the Pinellas Beekeepers Association and he's mentored over a hundred people to get them started with backyard beekeeping. Derek explains the importance of [00:01:00] bees as the world's population increases. He offers advice for new beekeepers, and he suggests ways to make any lawn more bee friendly.

Derek Lewis: I'm a third generation beekeeper. When my grandfather became allergic in 1952, his six beehives suddenly appeared in the bottom of our garden. We had about two and a half acres. I was the eldest grand, and we had the only suitable garden. This was in South Africa, some of you may recognize from my accent. I was thrown in the deep end with what today we would call Zoom learning from my grandfather.

He was a professor of education, a teacher of teachers, and I don't remember how it all went. Too long ago. I was much too young, but he threw me in the deep end and I learned to swim or rather a love of bees.

Dalia Colón: That's amazing. So it's been decades [00:02:00] now. And now you're here based in St. Petersburg, right?

Derek Lewis: Yes, I'm in St. Pete. Um, I've been here seven years now, and after moving here, I realized that I could keep bees in our own little yard here with a couple of minor conditions, like a six foot fence and a no African bees.

Dalia Colón: No African bees, but you're African , . The irony,

Derek Lewis: The irony of it, yes, no aggressive bees is what they really mean.

So I soon realized that there's a need for mentors and so I decided to try and put back into what had been my lifetime hobby and put back into the hobby what I could do as a mentor. I think I've done fairly well. I've probably got well over a hundred people started by far. The majority is still active and one of them jumped in and he was very enthusiastic and he got to know everybody else in the club, picked everybody's brains and became the vice president of the Pinellas Beekeeping Club.

Dalia Colón: Wow. That must make you proud. So what do you say to [00:03:00] sell people on beekeeping?

Derek Lewis: Mostly by the time they get to me, they're already mostly sold. We have a a on our website, uh, for people to sign up for a mentor. So that gets passed on to me. I get hold of them and talk to them and find out where they are, what they know, and try and get them along.

Many of them I have brought out to bee yards and to work on bees. Many of them I've got them to go to where I have it be removal and help them to do the work and then they can take the bees home and get them. So I'll get them started with their own bees fairly quickly.

Dalia Colón: Okay. Why would anyone wanna take bees home?

That's the part I'm struggling with.

Derek Lewis: Well, we all love honey. Okay. But in reality, bees far greater function in, in society is their pollination. They are [00:04:00] sophisticated little creatures. They won't go any further than they have to. So friends of mine have often said to me when they didn't have their own bees in their yard, they had to hand pollinate some of their plants cause there was no pollination.

The moment there were bees in the yard, everything was pollinated. I've heard other stories from someone else who said he had a fruit tree in his garden, produced no fruit for many years until some bees moved in into the shed in his yard and all of a sudden he had all the fruit he could. Then his neighbor decided to do him a favor and kill the bees and he got no more fruit.

Dalia Colón: Oh, wow. Speak to the larger role that bees play because even people who don't have bees on their property are benefiting from the presence of bees, right?

Derek Lewis: Well, in, in the simple terms, one in three to four mouthfuls of your food, if you eat fairly healthy need [00:05:00] pollination, almost all your fruits and vegetables and nuts, which are your healthiest foods all need pollination. And strangely enough, even some grasses and alfalfa is a particular one, which act as feed for cows requires pollination. It's a full cycle. We need the pollination to produce the feed for the cows and the pigs and the, and what have you, about more than half the total number.

Hives in the United States are transported to California every year just to pollinate the almond crop. They go in there and they're there for about three weeks to pollinate the almond crop. It's very highly organized. They've tried. Everything else I can think of, they have to have the bees in there.

They pay us over \$200 a good hive to take 'em there. So simple math, you know, 200 times 1.7 million is, it's a lot [00:06:00] of money involved.

Dalia Colón: Sure is. And I eat a lot of almonds so I appreciate every one of those bees. Talk to me about some of the challenges you faced besides being told you couldn't have African bees.

I heard that you got into some trouble with your be.

Derek Lewis: I did Indeed. It's actually quite a funny story. In September, no, 20, I was cited by the city for selling honey from home, and I thought, this is ridiculous. I've sold honey from home all my life. My mother and father used to sell it from the office and et cetera, et cetera, and I thought, no, let me, I, and I fought back.

I wrote to the city, I complained. I applied for a variance to sell it. And this went round and round in in circles. And then suddenly I was thrown into the city attorney and they decided, no, we need to go in a different direction. And they put me into the urban agricultural unit. And the whole process of this, I appear before city council two or three times to speak on [00:07:00] behalf of keeping bees.

And I got involved with a city councilor, Brandi Gabbard who was promoting and organizing the urban agriculture law enforcement, feat, and as a result of that, I was able to persuade them to add honey into the list of approved products that can be sold from home under the Urban Ag Act. Brandy went to another level and she got hold of the Mayor, Rick Kreisman at the time, and persuaded him to write a proclamation that St. Pete would become a bee friendly city. I have a copy of that hanging on my wall. . You know, I was very much involved

in that right from the beginning, you know, from being cited in the beginning and told, don't do it.

Dalia Colón: Amazing. And now it feels like everybody's doing it.

Derek Lewis: Yes. And I talked to one of the inspectors recently and since then the Bee Act for the state, the state had passed a law allowing honey for sale.

Now they've just sort [00:08:00] of given up trying to worry about urban ag. They just didn't do it. Let do it. And we, we really don't cause a lot of trouble.

Dalia Colón: Not at all. And actually just yesterday I bought, um, a plant and some honey from a woman in the Seminole Heights neighborhood of Tampa.

And I thought it was the coolest thing that she had this going on in her yard.

Derek Lewis: It's all part of what Brandi Gabbard and myself and various other people have been pushing for, for some.

Dalia Colón: And I know you've been pushing for some other bee friendly adaptations. Can you talk about some of those? Bee hotel, what is that?

Derek Lewis: Bee hotel is for solitary bees. Now basically we only have one honey bee in North America and that's *Apis mellifera*, but there are 400 species of solitary bees in Florida alone there are about 1700 in the US and these all need a nest in a tube. And so we make nests out of bamboo tubes and different sizes of [00:09:00] tubes.

They need anything from an eighth of an inch to half an inch for the bigger bumblebees. And they lay the eggs in there, pack it with food, seal it off, another egg, food, seal it off, another egg, food, seal it off until the tube is full, and the last egg they lay in there will be a male. Because bees can select whether they lay a male egg or a female egg.

Dalia Colón: I didn't know that.

Derek Lewis: Yeah, it's a haploid system just to, for the technicalities. So that's, Another facet that I've been doing is, and, and Brandi and I worked together. We've put in, I just put in one today at the Barbara Ponce Library, uh, on the entrance. We put up another bee hotel there and we put them up in three parks around the town.

Dalia Colón: So some people are probably hearing this and thinking, I need to stay away from that library. ?

Derek Lewis: No, no. These are, these are all solitary bees. Many of them don't even have a sting. And right at the moment, you can go look at it very safely [00:10:00] because it's the wrong season for the bees to breed. There won't be much action there for a while, but the Barbara Ponce Library is running a program for children and they've just been had 40 bee hotel kits donated to them, and we are going to assemble them and bring the kids in and get them to make them and paint them and take 'em home.

Dalia Colón: That's fun. It's kind of like the new free little libraries that you see. Popping up all over town.

Now, what are the mistakes that people make that you've seen over the years? Because I could see someone uneducated like myself. Trying to install a trap nest on my roof and then ending up with bees all over the house and my kids getting stung. And how do we prevent that?

Derek Lewis: No, no. It's very simple. You wouldn't really install it necessarily. I would install it or one [00:11:00] of my friends and we just put it up on the roof. And you don't do anything to it except call me the moment you see bees. When they arrive, it's very obvious they've moved in. You know, but they're not interested in you. They not interested in you at all. They won't bother you at all.

They're just moving into their home and they won't bother you, basically un, unless you try and disturb them.

Dalia Colón: Okay. I feel like that's what everyone says. It's it, it's not interested in you. It's, it won't bother you if you don't bother it. ,

Derek Lewis: one of the worst things you can do is to swat at a bee when it flies around you.

And one of the minor advantages that I have is, I'm bald. So when they bounce off my head, they just bounce off and fly away. With people with long hair, they get tangled up in their hair and then panic. And so I, Hey wait, come grab their hair and they get stung. And the bees? Bees just landed up. I mean, I walk through my apiary uh, and [00:12:00] bees bounce off me all the time.

I just was in the way, you know, they just didn't see me. And boom, they bounced off me and flew. Until you start doing something in there and disturbing their hive, they're not interested.

Dalia Colón: Okay, so if we're not quite ready for our own apiary, are there things we could plant or things we could do with our yard that would attract pollinators in a different way maybe?

Derek Lewis: Well, anything you plant, the flowers will attract bees. Almost any flower needs a pollinator to pollinate it so it can reproduce. Doesn't matter whether it's a fruit or a vegetable or just a flower, they need pollinators. And so the more you plant the better. Beautiful green lawns are the most useless form of agriculture that man has ever invented.

It's a lot of hard sweat and labor, uh, a lot of expense, and it produces absolutely nothing. There's absolutely no return on [00:13:00] your investment except to your eyes.

Dalia Colón: So, what would you propose instead of a beautiful green lawn?

Derek Lewis: Well, if you look around and you'll find some beautiful natural gardens around, some people have done it very, very nicely.

But the simple thing is, is just to allow the lawn to flower. You plant wild flowers in there that will grow and look nice..

Dalia Colón: In an email that you sent to me, you said that blueberries in particular were a good plant. Why is that?

Derek Lewis: Well, blueberries are a unique plant in the sense that they're quite difficult for bees, honeybees to get in to pollinate.

So we have a strange sort of symbiotic relationship between bumblebees and honeybees. Bumblebees are big and strong. They're going and they smash open the uh, flower and then the bees can get in and pollinate. And it's, it's well proven that if they [00:14:00] don't have good pollination, the quality of the fruit is substantially reduced and the volume is radically reduced of almost all of these major plants, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, fruits.

If you go to an apple orchard, all of them today organized to have a beekeeper bring bees to settle in their yard during the flowering season, whenever that may be.. They pay them to it and it pays them hands down.

Dalia Colón: How many people do you think you have mentored over the years and what would you like to see next?

What's your legacy would you say?

Derek Lewis: Well, I've mentored well over a hundred people. Most of them are still active. If nothing else, all of them have left a, a knowledge of beekeeping and a need for bees. So if nothing else are provided an education. Maybe there is a whole subset of of society that knows nothing about bees and couldn't give a darn [00:15:00] about them or thinks they're just a nuisance value.

This is where podcasts like this are very valuable of educating the public as a whole.

Dalia Colón: and the people who couldn't give a darn about them will give a darn if they run out of food. . I understand the reasons on paper, why we need bees and why beekeeping is important, but you've been doing this now for what, like seven decades or so?

What keeps you going? Why are you so passionate about beekeeping?

Derek Lewis: For a period of time here, my wife and I were somewhat bored. We're retired, we're old and, and we didn't have much to do. I got involved in beekeeping and I'm now so busy, I hardly know. . I'm as busy as well on paper hanger, running around helping people with bees,

It's become a whole new career for me, promoting bees in, in multiple levels. I'm still involved with, well, talks like this with the city [00:16:00] council. Of course with our beekeeping association as well as individual people,

Dalia Colón: and you're gonna have more people calling you probably after they hear this. So . So what's a, what's a good resource?

What's a good next step for people who, who want to get more involved in caring for the bees?

Derek Lewis: The easiest thing is to look on our website, which is Pinellas Beekeeping Association. It'll tell you when our next meeting is, where it is, and if you want a mentor, sign up for mentorship. Meetings are open to the public, no charge because part of our mission as a, as an association is to promote beekeeping and beekeeper.

So anybody can come join the meetings and hopefully you'll get involved and, and become a beekeeper in your own right. Okay?

Dalia Colón: Okay. Maybe I'll start with planting some, some more flowers in my yard. Derek, this has been so fascinating and I almost hesitate to ask this because I know you have so much more information, but is there anything else that [00:17:00] we didn't talk about that you really want people to know?

Derek Lewis: Well, to challenge the public, what can you do for bees and pollination? There are little things that everybody can do, such as you talking about planting flowers in your yard. You can put up a BE hotel if you interested. Go to the Barbara Ponce library and you'll see the, the bee hotel we put up there today.

Several of the parks around Rivera Bay Park, two other parks in town where we put up be hotels and you can take a look at them and, you know, can you put that up in your, your own front yard and by putting up a bee hotel in your front yard, you are advertising the whole concept of beekeeping. Honeybees, you put somewhere safe in your backyard if you're gonna have them.

Okay. Or Bee Hotel goes on the roof somewhere or up in a tree. Bee hotels are something which you can put in your front yard and market them as you, you're showing off what you're doing.

Dalia Colón: Oh, that's a great point.

Derek Lewis: The [00:18:00] other thing I want to do long term is, persuade the cities and the big counties, what have you, to plant roadside back all their roadside. Instead of being beautiful green lawns of no use plant wildflowers, they can actually save money that way because they don't have to mow nearly as often, so they save a lot of money on mowing. They will look nicer and it will provide food for the pollinators. So it's a symbiotic thing. And you know, we have millions and millions of acres of roadside around the country, and millions and millions of acres that do nothing but look nice.

No, that's a great idea. I always love that. Um, seeing wild flowers on the highways and things like that. Well, Derek, it's been very inspiring and I feel like hopefully everybody walks away with one small thing they can do, and then the next step obviously is to call you , get a mentor.

Well, thank you so much for your time. It was great to connect with you.

Thank you very much. And the same to you. Thank you.

Dalia Colón: Okay, bye-bye. [00:19:00] Derek Lewis is a St. Petersburg resident and a member of the Pinellas Beekeepers Association. If you wanna learn more about beekeeping, we did a whole series on honeybees a while back, and you can find it on our website, thezestpodcast.com.

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