

Free to Bee



There's one overarching rule when working with bees: Stay calm. Beekeeping is not an easy skill to master when you are housed in one of the state's correctional facilities. However, for the past two years, offenders at four of Georgia's state prisons have been learning to work with bees through the University of Georgia's Georgia Master Beekeeper Program, which is associated with the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences entomology department and UGA Cooperative Extension.

"At first I thought, 'Are you kidding me? Inmates, smokers, hive tools; this is a horrible idea,'" said Jennifer Berry, Georgia Master Beekeeper instructor and UGA Honey Bee Lab research coordinator. "But after meeting and talking with the inmates, it was obvious that having something to take care of was such a privilege for these guys. You could see how protective they were of the bees, and how they wanted to learn anything they could to help keep them alive."

Beehives have been popping up in prisons across the country in the hopes that inmates can develop new vocational skills and success in an endeavor that takes patience, hard work and a lot of new knowledge. While Georgia's Master Beekeeper Prison Program started in 2015 with 15 inmates at Smith State Prison in Glennville, Georgia, it has now spread to



Inmates learn apiary care through Georgia Master Beekeeper Program

three other locations and has produced more than 30 Certified Beekeepers, with more about to join the ranks.

It all started when one inmate, who had been a beekeeper before he was incarcerated, wanted to start a beekeeping program at Smith State Prison. He developed a curriculum to teach the inmates about the science and methods of beekeeping and asked the prison's administration to reach out to the Ogeechee Area Beekeepers Association, a branch of the Georgia Beekeepers Association, to help present the idea to his fellow inmates.

With support from the Georgia

Department of Corrections (GDC), the Georgia Beekeepers Association, the Ogeechee Area Beekeepers Association and equipment donations from Brushy Mountain Bee Farm, the prison's new apiary was up and running. Soon, the prison would have an entire class of Certified Beekeepers to manage it.

In spring 2015, Berry traveled to Smith State Prison along with Bear Kelley, a past president of Georgia Beekeepers Association, to teach the inmates the practical skills they needed to become Certified Beekeepers. A few months later, Berry, accompanied by the entire UGA Bee Lab crew, administered the exams and certified the first batch of inmates.

Not only did every inmate who took the test – and two GDC employees – pass the Certified Beekeeper exam, their average scores were well above scores attained on the statewide test given at Young Harris College.

"I could tell how excited they were not only to be learning something, but to be recognized for their accomplishments," Berry said. "Some of these guys had not had that experience before."

This fall, close to 60 additional inmates will go through the Georgia Master Beekeeper Program at Arrendale State Prison, a women's facility near Alto, Georgia; Dooly State Prison, a men's facility in Unadilla, Georgia; and Ware State Prison, a men's facility in Waycross, Georgia.

Having trained beekeepers and



apiaries at multiple locations across the state will enable the beekeeping program to become, and hopefully remain, self-sustaining.

Inmates at Smith State Prison, as the program's pilot facility, will focus on rearing queen bees so that they and the other prisons can continue to start new hives. Inmates at Ware State Prison will work on the manufacture of hives because they have a large wood shop, and inmates at Arrendale State Prison will supply the bees.

"Hands-on experience engages inmates, making them eager to study and succeed," said Buster Evans, assistant commissioner of inmate services for the GDC. "The vocational certification the offenders will receive will ensure that they will not come back to prison once released."

While beekeeping may seem like a niche industry to some, it's becoming big business in Georgia. The production of honey, bee removal, queen and bee production, pollination services and apiary supplies are valued at \$367 million across the

state. UGA supports Georgia's bee industry through groundbreaking research into honeybee health and by providing continuing education to Georgia's beekeepers. Since the beginning of the Georgia Master Beekeeper Program, more than 450 people have been certified.

"It is truly amazing to see the vision of one of our offenders develop into a program that is now offered to offenders across the state of Georgia," said GDC Commissioner Homer Bryson. "We are excited about our partnership with the University of Georgia, which will allow these offenders to become Certified Beekeepers."

■ Merritt Melancon



Top: Researcher Nicholas Weaver (center) quizzes inmates for the Georgia Master Beekeeper Program exam at Smith State Prison in Glennville, Georgia. Above: Georgia Master Beekeeper instructor and UGA Honey Bee Lab research coordinator Jennifer Berry explains subject matter for the exam. Opposite page: Weaver and an inmate inspect a frame.