

Wilbanks Apiaries

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Since my introduction to bees, I have attended numerous beekeeping conferences, and during those events I have met many interesting people. This has been a highlight of my job. Everyone has a story to share, an idea, a trick for this or a tool for that. So, why I am telling you this? I've been trying to gather stories focusing on the fundamentals of beekeeping in the Southern U.S. This was a challenge. How does one incorporate information on an area with such a wide variety of honey plants, soil types, and climates? What Maryland beekeepers are doing in October is different from beekeeping activities the same month in Georgia. So, I decided to drop the "Beekeeping in the South" idea in favor of visting with personalities that are uniquely southern. We'll visit commercial operators, hobbyists and researchers during my journey visiting beekeepers in the South. We'll find Southern beekeeping practices, different modes of operation, and tricks of the trade rather than seasonal beekeeping tasks. We'll explore research programs across the area, and may just find some interesting personalities to boot. Hopefully, it'll teach us a thing or two and no doubt, we'll come across that one in a million tall tale to share.

First, let me clarify what I mean by "the South," which includes states east of Texas (including Texas) plus the states south of the Mason Dixon line. That's the "South" where I came from.

Let me introduce to you one of Georgia's own, Mr. Reg Wilbanks. Reg comes from a long line of beekeepers, himself being the fourth generation. Reg is owner and operator of Wilbanks Apiaries, Inc. It is one of the country's largest commercial operations that ships package bees and queens nationally and internationally.

The Wilbanks business started when Reg's great grandfather, Gresham Duckett, gave his grandfather,

Guy T. Wilbanks, four hives of bees as a wedding present back in the 1800s. With hard work, dedication and the help of his son, Warren Wilbanks, Reg's grandfather, soon turned those four colonies into three hundred. In the early years the business focused on honey production. At that time their family resided in Banks County in North Georgia located at the foot hills of the Appalachian Mountains. Their honey market ranged from the surrounding area all the way to Atlanta. North Georgia is known for its sourwood honey which blooms during the Summer months. However, honey flows can

be un-dependable, being almost non-existent some years. Just ask any of the north Georgia beekeepers today. The past four years have seen little sourwood honey.

Back to the story. In 1946, the family home was destroyed in a fire so Guy and Warren Wilbanks moved to south Georgia, where floral sources offered larger honey crops and had a reputation for being more dependable than their northern counterparts. However, the first year after their arrival, the honey crop was a disaster. No crop, no money. So Guy T.

Wilbanks had to take a job in the shipyards in Brunswick, Georgia. Warren Wilbanks, Reg's father, also needed to make ends meet so he went to work for the Georgia Department of Agriculture as a state bee inspector. The job not only offered an income but also an opportunity to travel and learn about different honey bee operations, primarily the queen and package bee industry. The family decided to branch out from solely producing honey to producing package bees and queens. A year later, the family moved to Claxton, Georgia, their present location.

Reg was involved in the family business taking only a short break to attend college. After receiving a BS degree in Industrial Management from Georgia Southern University in 1972, he returned home, eventually



Webbs Win At Apimondia

In August the world convened in Dublin, Ireland for the 39th Apimondia International Apicultural Congress. Along with lectures and exhibitors there was the world honey show in which America stole the stage. Here are the results.

Virginia Webb, from Clarkesville, Georgia, won a Gold medal for her 24-Jar entry. It is hard to overstate the significance of this award. It is considered "Best in the World," crème de la crème, number one. This award is the one that other honey exhibitors covet because it is the hardest to achieve. Virginia took home several other awards: a Silver in Decorative Display of Honey, a Silver for two Jars Light Honey and two Jars Medium Honey, and a Bronze medal in Dark Honey. Virginia was the top medal winner in the honey show. The U.S. National Honey Board sponsored her Display Class while Gamber Containers sponsored her other entries. Other winning Americans included Wayne Morris from Montana with Gold Medals for his Ross Rounds and Section Comb Honey and a Bronze Medal for Chunk Honey. Judy Schmaltz from Clarkston, Minnesota won a Gold for Crystallized Honey, and Ray Nicholson from Wadena, Minnesota won a Bronze for his Ross Rounds. Finally, Carl Webb, husband of Virginia, won a Bronze for the 24-Jar Class and a Bronze for his Beeswax Block.

Let me explain why the 24-Jar entry is so difficult. First, each jar must be in the same and perfect condition: no honey on lids, filled to an exact proportion, no smudges on the glass, no debris in the honey, etc. The 24-jar entry must also conform to European Union label regulations.

So how did Virginia get all that honey to Ireland, you ask? She mailed it to the hotel where she and Carl were staying. After arriving in Dublin, Virginia spent days in her hotel room cleaning jars, removing air bubbles, attaching labels, and ensuring proper levels of honey in each container. Not only does the honey have to be world class, but the container as well. Virginia and Carl Webb started working on their entries a year in advance. That's the kind of dedication it takes to win best in the world. Congratulations to all our state-side winners.



becoming president of Wilbanks Apiaries, Inc. Since that time he has been active in all aspects of the beekeeping industry. He was president for three consecutive terms for the Georgia Beekeepers Association and the American Bee Breeders Association. He's served as Chairman of the Georgia Farm Bureau Honey Bee Advisory Committee and as president of the American Beekeeping Federation in which he is still involved as a member of its Board of Directors. He served as a member of the American Farm Bureau Research Advisory Committee for fire ants and Africanized honey bees. In 1987 he was appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to represent the U.S. beekeeping industry on the USDA *Varroa* Mite Negotiating Rulemaking Committee. He is a member of the National Honey Board and represents producer region six which includes Georgia, Florida and Puerto Rico. He is the past chairman of the University of Georgia Agricultural Experiment Station Research Advisory Board, and in 1984 he received the Georgia "Beekeeper of the Year" award. He also has numerous civic, state and local appointments to his credit. Reg is not only dedicated to his business, but also to the community in which he works and lives.

Wilbank's Apiaries operate approximately 6,000 colonies primarily for the production of package bees, which results in 15,000 – 20,000 packages a year. As for the queen rearing side of the operation, they run close to 15,000 mating nuclei which produce over 60,000 queens annually for sale worldwide. The colonies and nuclei are spread out over a six county area which keeps Reg and his employees moving. It is an impressive operation, and when I visited he and his crew of 20 were about to depart on a deep sea fishing adventure. After they returned to shore, Reg was treating them to a weekend of relaxation on the beach at Tybee Island. This business is hard work. He and his crew hustle year round from sun up till sun down. Reg realizes this and rewards his employees each year.

Before we finish, let's look at a typical year for Wilbanks Apiaries. South Georgia in January is still a little on the cool side. Red Maple, which marks the beginning of the season for Georgia, is fixing to bloom and a rigorous feeding program has begun for colonies selected for package production. This, in combination with the pollen collected off the Red Maple stimulates the queen to begin laying and colony populations explode overnight.

By the middle of February the grafting operation begins and newly grafted queen cells are coming off by the first week of March. These cells are placed into baby nucs which have been stocked and are ready for production. If all goes well, including no major weather systems or unforeseen problems, the first round of mated queens are ready for sale by the last week of March.

By the first week of April, an additional crew comes in to start shaking packages. This will last several weeks, usually subsiding by the first week of June. However, they will continue to raise queens through September. After the last of the packages are mailed out, the "shaking" crew shifts gears and begins to requeen every colony. As they enter each colony, they clean bottom boards, scrap off lids, and remove burr

comb between the frames, the top bars, sides, etc. When trying to produce 20,000 packages and 60,000 queens annually, speed is important. Colonies must be clear of burr comb and debris so frames come out easily without rolling bees and damaging queens. Materials that were ordered the first of July are arriving in the fall. By winter, packages are being assembled and repairs being made. Just as the hammer is put down January has arrived and the cycle begins again.

When I asked Reg why he choose beekeeping as a career he told me he enjoys working outside and with nature. He enjoys the constant challenge that beekeeping delivers on a day to day basis. How the nature of the job changes each day, each week, each month. He told me “beekeeping is in my blood” and in the blood of my sons. His two sons, Patrick and Timothy, comprise the fifth generation of Wilbanks beekeepers. When he was talking about why he loves working with bees and the challenges he faces, it sounded like so many other beekeepers I have spoken to over the years. I think there is something inherent in all beekeepers – a desire to work with one of nature’s most fascinating insects.

Or else we’re all a little crazy? Take your pick.

As we say in the south, see ya’ll soon. **BC**

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