

IS YOUR HONEY GREEN?

New natural beekeeping standards from Certified Naturally Grown

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Pesticides, monoculture crops, in-hive chemical treatments, pests and diseases, and colony collapse disorder, threaten honeybee health. Today, natural beekeeping is on the rise and many regard it as the surest way to support honeybee health. A new apiary certification program through Certified Naturally Grown now allows natural beekeepers to convey the value of their natural methods and gain a premium for their honey.

SWEET ENOUGH FOR THE NOP?

The National Organic Program (NOP) doesn't define specific standards for organic beekeeping. The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) Apiculture Task force submitted recommendations in 2001 which were never adopted. Some certifying agencies accredited by the NOP have developed their own beekeeping standards, but these tend to be accessible only to beekeepers with thousands of organic acreage surrounding their hives. Only farmers and beekeepers that are certified by a NOP-accredited agency, or sell less than \$5,000 per year, may claim their operations and products as organic. Uncertified natural beekeepers that use "organic" to describe their apiary or hive products risk fines of up to \$10,000 per day, per violation. What's a natural beekeeper to do?

A year and a half ago, Buddy, who is a Master Beekeeper, contacted Alice, the Director of Certified Naturally Grown (CNG), with his frustrations about NOP's lacking standards for small and mid-sized apiarists. Together, and with the help of many expert beekeepers from across the country, they drafted standards for natural beekeeping. Thus was born the only program of its kind in the country, Certified Naturally Grown's Apiary Certification Program.



Examining a frame from a nucleus colony. Photo by Ruth Meaker

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POLLINATING AND MAKING HONEY

The development of an apiary program came naturally for CNG. A group of small-scale, direct market farmers founded the nonprofit organization in 2002 as an alternative to the NOP. The primary purpose of CNG's Apiary Certification Program is to improve the health of honeybee population in America. The program helps achieve this goal by providing detailed guidance on best practices, encouraging a strong natural beekeeping community through local networks of mutually-supportive, information-sharing natural beekeepers and creating financial incentives for beekeepers to adopt natural methods.

CNG uses a peer-review inspection process known as the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) model of certification. It is fully committed to recognized organic practices but distinct from third-party certification programs like the NOP. The PGS model minimizes inspection fees and paperwork, and fosters local networks of farmers and beekeepers. Today more than 800 farmers in 48 states are enrolled in the CNG program and the number is growing every year.

Local networks are especially valuable for beekeepers, given the knowledge-intensive nature of beekeeping. The peer-review certification model is a good fit for local networks too, as nearby beekeepers are most familiar with the type and timing of local pest and disease pressures. Beyond doing an inspection, certifiers can offer welcome advice.

The certification standards are tailored for beekeepers with between 3 and 300 hives, which is ideal for hobbyists and sideliners. Commercial beekeepers are also welcome, though it may be difficult for large, commercial beekeeping operations to adhere to the certification standards.

To apiarists needing financial incentive to adopt natural methods, CNG offers attractive product labels, promotional materials and marketing advice to bolster support of natural honey. In addition, certified products gain the prestige of a well-respected national program.

The CNG Apiary Standards are more than a set of rules and regulations. They offer practical suggestions on how to manage colonies with minimal or no chemical exposure. For every facet of beekeeping, the standards define what is required and prohibited to remain certified, and give recommendations for meeting the standards. Beekeeping practices are categorized as "required," "recommended," "permitted," or "prohibited." The standards are strict but quite doable. For those moving away from synthetic treatments, the standards include a transition table, time frame, and steps needed for full certification.

The standards address apiary location, hive position, hive construction, frames, foundation and brood comb removal, frames and foundation in honey supers, queen and bee sources, supplemental feeding, honey removal, processing and labeling, wax processing, hive and frame storage and transfer between colonies, moving colonies, colonies engaged in pollination services, hive transition, and record keeping. A comprehensive list of allowed and prohibited substances is included in the certification guidelines, posted online at www.naturallygrown.org/apiaryprogram.

GROWING THE COLONY

CNG is developing marketing materials and providing educational workshops to support beekeepers interested in natural practices, thanks to a grant from the USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP). The grant has allowed CNG to offer educational workshops on natural beekeeping in North Carolina and southern Virginia (supported by the North Carolina State Beekeepers Association and the Virginia State Beekeeper's Association) and have educated nearly 400 beekeepers.

“ In the face of daunting environmental challenges, it is inspiring to join with others who have chosen natural methods to try healing and strengthening the honeybee population. ”

IS YOUR HONEY GREEN?

CNG has developed an apiary certification program to support natural beekeeping.

Certified Naturally Grown Beekeepers:

- Refrain from in-hive chemical treatments
- Leave enough honey for the bees
- Locate hives near ample, diverse forage
- Don't feed high fructose corn syrup
- Care for the bees who help provide our food

