

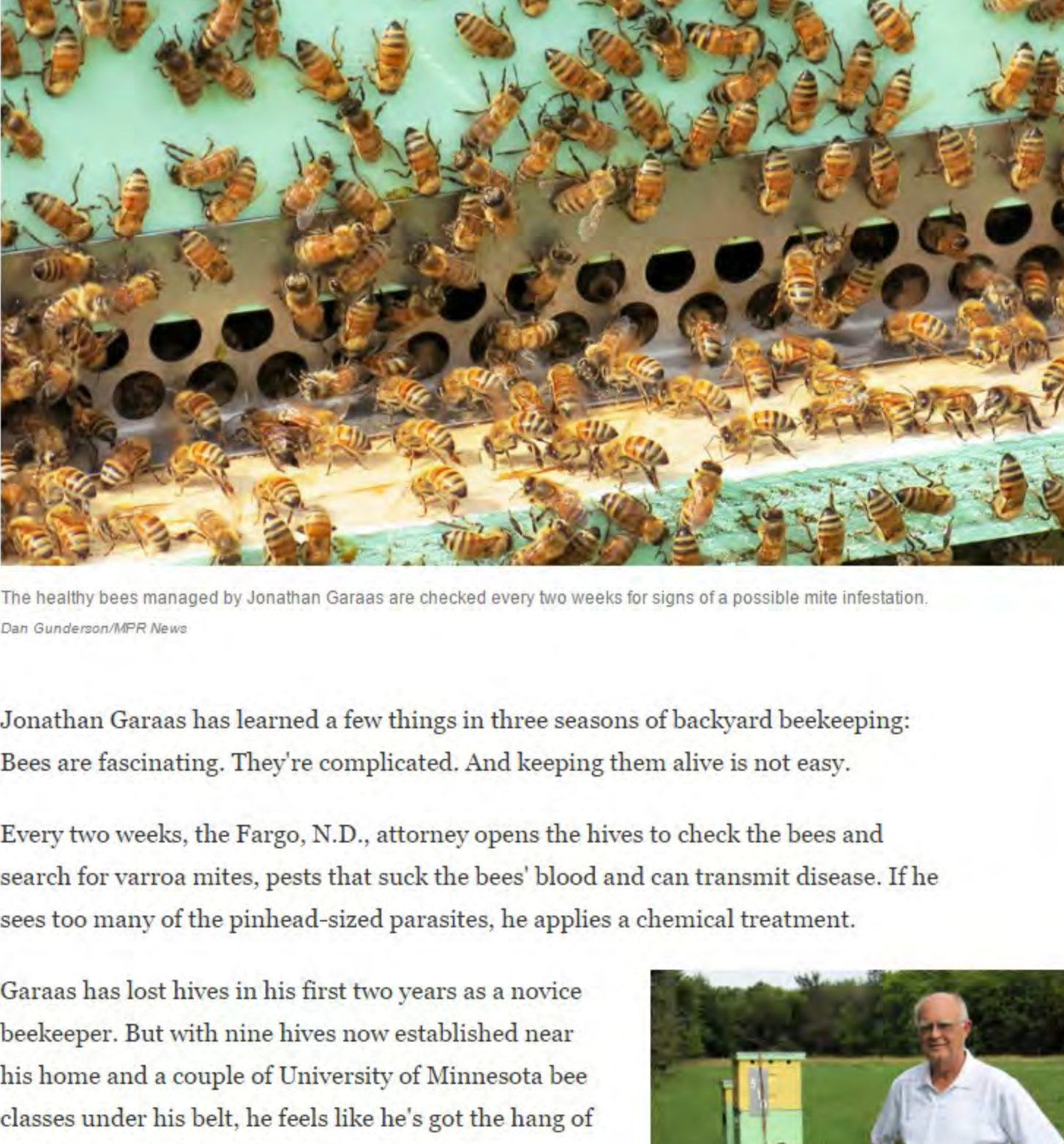
PRODUCTS

The Colony-Killing Mistake Backyard Beekeepers Are Making

August 12, 2016 · 2:50 PM ET

DAN GUNDERSON

FROM



The healthy bees managed by Jonathan Garaas are checked every two weeks for signs of a possible mite infestation.
Dan Gunderson/NPR News

Jonathan Garaas has learned a few things in three seasons of backyard beekeeping: Bees are fascinating. They're complicated. And keeping them alive is not easy.

Every two weeks, the Fargo, N.D., attorney opens the hives to check the bees and search for varroa mites, pests that suck the bees' blood and can transmit disease. If he sees too many of the pinhead-sized parasites, he applies a chemical treatment.

Garaas has lost hives in his first two years as a novice beekeeper. But with nine hives now established near his home and a couple of University of Minnesota bee classes under his belt, he feels like he's got the hang of it, although it's still a challenge.

"You can get the book learning. You can see the YouTubes. You can be told by others," he says, but "you have to have hands-on experience. When you start putting it all together, it starts making sense."

Scientists wish every beginner beekeeper were as diligent as Garaas.

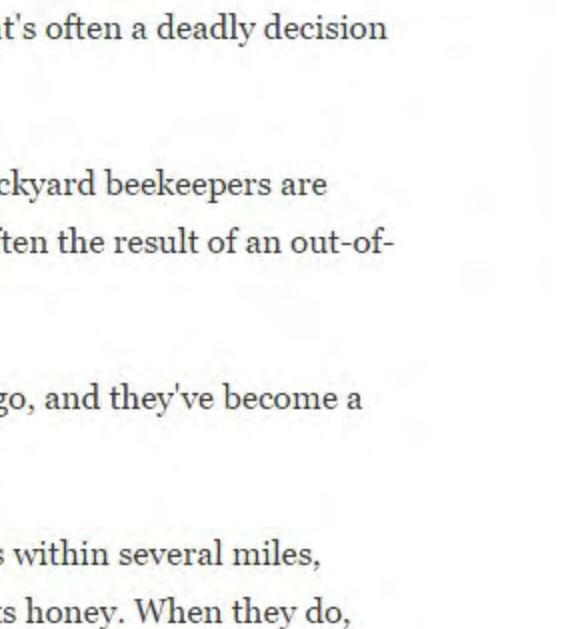
While experts welcome the rising national interest in beekeeping as a hobby, they warn that novices may be inadvertently putting their hives — and other hives for miles around — in danger by not keeping the bee mite population in check.

Many hobbyists avoid mite treatments, preferring a natural approach, says Marla Spivak, a bee expert at the University of Minnesota. But that's often a deadly decision for the bees, she says.

National surveys by the [Bee Informed Partnership](#) show backyard beekeepers are taking the greatest losses nationally, and those losses are often the result of an out-of-control infestation of the varroa mite, says Spivak.

Varroa mites arrived in the United States nearly 30 years ago, and they've become a big problem in recent years.

Untreated hives can spread mites and viruses to other hives within several miles, Spivak says. Healthy bees will invade a dying hive to steal its honey. When they do, they carry the mites with them back to their hives.



Attorney and hobby beekeeper Jonathan Garaas keeps nine thriving hives outside of Fargo, N.D.
Dan Gunderson/NPR News

"The combination of the mite and the viruses is deadly," says Spivak.

The University of Minnesota Bee Squad, a group that provides beekeeping education and mentoring in the Twin Cities, is seeing more healthy hives become rapidly infested with mites and the viruses they carry.

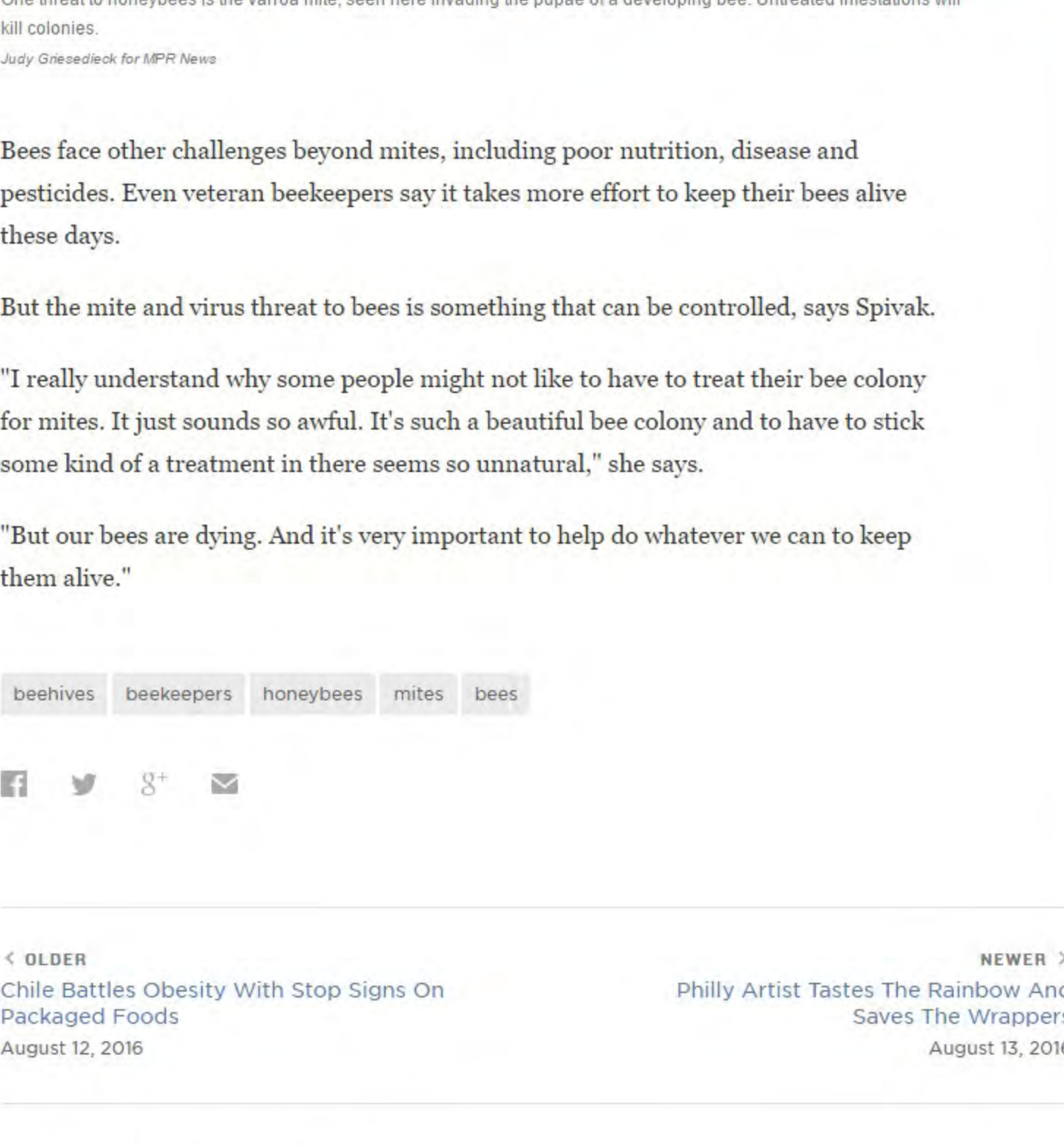
Fall is an especially critical season, says Rebecca Masterman, the Bee Squad's associate program director.

"That late season reinfestation means that bees are going through winter with a lot of mite pressure and it's really hard for them to come out of that and survive," she says.

"It's important enough to really try to get every backyard beekeeper in the country to at least be aware of it."

Masterman says she's also encouraging commercial beekeepers to check their bees more often for surprise mite infestations. A new [online mite-monitoring project](#) lets beekeepers anywhere in the country share data on infestations that will help researchers track the spread.

A mite control experiment this summer should provide more information about how to best treat mites in bee colonies.



One threat to honeybees is the varroa mite, seen here invading the pupae of a developing bee. Untreated infestations will kill colonies.
Judy Greedecook for NPR News

Bees face other challenges beyond mites, including poor nutrition, disease and pesticides. Even veteran beekeepers say it takes more effort to keep their bees alive these days.

But the mite and virus threat to bees is something that can be controlled, says Spivak.

"I really understand why some people might not like to have to treat their bee colony for mites. It just sounds so awful. It's such a beautiful bee colony and to have to stick some kind of a treatment in there seems so unnatural," she says.

"But our bees are dying. And it's very important to help do whatever we can to keep them alive."

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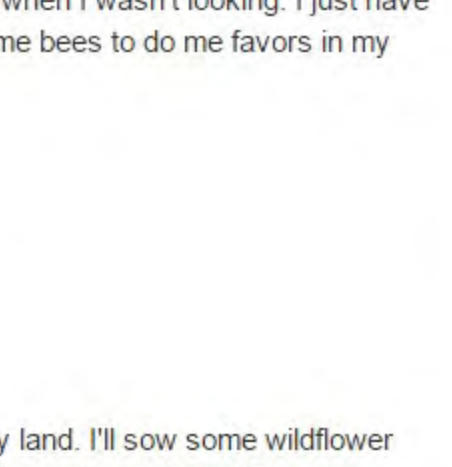
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Vern Wells · 3 days ago
Thanks for this article. It reminded me that I haven't even checked my hives since I put them out when I moved here. I need to contact a local beekeeper to get her to establish some colonies in them. Probably won't do that until next spring, though. Not sure when the best time of year is to do that. I'll have to ask. I was planning on getting some wild flowers started around them first. This first year out here is all planning and preparation. Hopefully it'll all start coming together next spring.
8 · Share

Abbi Baily · Vern Wells · 3 days ago
You have bees?
Neat!
3 · Share

Vern Wells · Abbi Baily · 3 days ago
Not yet, or at least not that I'm aware of unless some bees have moved in when I wasn't looking. I just have the hives that I bought before I moved out here. Hopefully, I WILL have some bees to do me favors in my gardens. Gotta prepare a wildflower menu for them first.
3 · Share

Abbi Baily · Vern Wells · 3 days ago
Clover! You can then feed bees and fix nitrogen at the same time.
3 · Share

Vern Wells · Abbi Baily · 3 days ago
Maybe. But I'm actually leaving the bees in an untouched part of my land. I'll sow some wildflower seeds there next spring but I don't want to be growing anything cultivated near them. If the bee professional agrees, I want to leave them as natural as possible. They should be able to find my flowers and veggies on their own. I don't want to risk killing them because of something I've done harm handely. I'll have the bee pro come by occasionally to make sure they're healthy.
4 · Share

This comment was deleted.

Abbi Baily · Guest · 3 days ago
Be quiet.
2 · Share

anonono · Abbi Baily · 3 days ago
Apparently Rassalas knows something scientists don't.
2 · Share

Rassalas · anonono · 3 days ago
I know a lot scientists don't but in this instance, Vern should just go back to watching sports and eating twinkies. Bees need not be involved.
1 · Share

faile13 · Vern Wells · 3 days ago
Bees forage up to a mile away, you can do both at once.
1 · Share

Vern Wells · faile13 · 3 days ago
Yeah, I might plant a little clover just for the bees if my veggies and garden flowers don't do it for them.
1 · Share

funbobby51 · Vern Wells · 3 days ago
you will get your bees delivered in spring but you should order well in advance as they sell out
1 · Share

Vern Wells · funbobby51 · 3 days ago
I'm gonna leave the whole bee project to a professional. As I've said here before, I'm not interested in bees for any commercial value. I don't even want to steal their honey. I just want them as pollinators for my fruit trees and gardens. I'd prefer to treat them as naturally as possible.
1 · Share

AnnaMariahTheSecond · Vern Wells · 3 days ago
If all you need is pollinators, you might not need honey bees as long as you have a variety of pollen sources and native bee habitat on your property, there are several varieties of native bees, such as bumble bees. Mason bees, stingless bees, etc and other insects too that are pollinators, and some plants are wind pollinated, so no insects needed. Talk to your county extension agent for more info.
 · Share

funbobby51 · Vern Wells · 3 days ago
you should look into bumble bees
 · Share

Vern Wells · funbobby51 · 3 days ago
Not sure how one would cultivate bumble bees. They aren't hive dwellers. They're welcome to join the party, though.
3 · Share

funbobby51 · Vern Wells · 3 days ago
you can purchase them mail order: they are better pollinators and seem to be low maintenance
 · Share

faile13 · funbobby51 · 3 days ago
They don't require hives
 · Share

funbobby51 · faile13 · 3 days ago
they have many advantages for his application
 · Share

Rassalas · Vern Wells · 3 days ago
Give it up. Honestly.
1 · Share

Vern Wells · Rassalas · 3 days ago
Not on your life.
3 · Share

This comment was deleted.

Lilli Tavares · Guest · 3 days ago
Vern may be a novice beekeeper but he is an expert on old goats.
2 · Share

anonono · Rassalas · 3 days ago
I'm glad others have a more positive, can-do attitude.
4 · Share

Stuffed Bear · Vern Wells · 2 days ago
Where are you Vern?
 · Share

Vern Wells · Stuffed Bear · 2 days ago
At home. In Texas.
 · Share

funbobby51 · 3 days ago
It would be funny if they traced the recent widespread problems back to hipster backyard beekeepers who wanted to avoid using proper controls.
5 · Share

David Geyer · funbobby51 · 3 days ago
What would really be funny is if they traced colony collapse back to the NRA and gun manufacturers.
4 · Share

funbobby51 · David Geyer · 3 days ago
Bloomberg is doing his best
2 · Share

AnnaMariahTheSecond · funbobby51 · 3 days ago
That probably played a part.
1 · Share

funbobby51 · AnnaMariahTheSecond · 3 days ago
But blaming pesticides is so much better
1 · Share

AnnaMariahTheSecond · funbobby51 · 3 days ago
Sure is. Nothing makes me happier! :)
1 · Share

This comment was deleted.

funbobby51 · Guest · 3 days ago
Las Vegas?
 · Share

tomasjae · 3 days ago
This isn't a recent widespread problem. Varroa mites have been around for a while now. NPR just decided to do an article on it. So the "smart" people read the article and think backyard beekeepers are killing the bee population off because NPR got one source who said so, and that everyone needs to use chemicals. There are clean treatments...and they work. Chemicals don't sound so appetizing to me.
4 · Share

Me Sc · tomasjae · 3 days ago
That was my first thought/question/suspicion. Mostly, I'm frustrated with NPR's article (per usual), because it just doesn't give enough information. We're supposed to walk away from this article believing that "natural" backyard beekeepers are the bad guys, because of their ignorance or refusal to use chemicals, but the article doesn't even go into the different options (and rates of success) for treating the Varroa mites. It says nothing about conventional treatments or how these "backyard beekeepers" differ in their methods. It also doesn't talk about any history of mite issues that would have lead to such conventional treatments even existing in the first place. It's just a poor non-informative article that doesn't enable any of us to understand the issue in a meaningful way. NPR is getting really good at writing non-articles like this.
1 · Share

Issel Hyoudou · Me Sc · 18 hours ago
The article states that there is a study being done this summer to help identify effective varroa treatment. You feel like there's already effective treatments available but apparently the entire beekeeping world doesn't agree with you.
 · Share

Jim Gordon · tomasjae · 3 days ago
That's the problem - your attitude times 10,000 bee keepers.
 · Share

Catchup Felidae · 3 days ago
Probably the most accurate portrait of this OCD myth. I am surprised someone(a reporter) actually went and read the Bee Inform report, and noted the huge difference in bee colony health between the Pros and the Backyarders...
2 · Share

SomeoneWhoComments · Catchup Felidae · 2 days ago
Nice when people know what they are talking about ain't it?
 · Share

So much different when they don't and claim expertise higher than the experts while throwing mud on the issue.
 · Share

faile13 · 3 days ago
Instead of focusing on lack of treatment to backyard beekeepers who have a huge financial and emotional investment, what about commercial keepers who transport bees everywhere without being monitored? Or providing proof of recent meds etc... They have to do that for race horses and dogs, why not bees which might have local hives, wild and managed as well as other pollinators. I am a beekeeper and am fanatic about health of hive, as well as infected woodware. I and my hive hubby have burned a lot of equipment that we didn't trust.
2 · Share

This comment was deleted.

bluhorizons · Guest · 3 days ago
Even though you don't like them and obviously have an obsession about them, with the world population exploding all kinds of pesticides are needed as well as genetically modified food to feed all the people. What worked OK when we had 2.4B people won't work for 7B.

Oh I know you will come back with all kinds of bull about "natural" but farmers are not pressured into buying pesticides and using GM seeds. They buy that stuff because it works, gives them better yields and puts food on the table. And trying to suggest that NPR downplays your idea of the cure because Monsanto, your favorite to hate donates to NPR tells us you are obsessed.
4 · Share

Jim Gordon · bluhorizons · 3 days ago
Thank you. Completely accurate. The obsession is a harmful effect of dishonest activists who will post any lie on sites that have no warning to visitors that they are 100% garbage.
1 · Share

Ellen Kayser · Guest · 3 days ago
Where is this evidence that Round-Up a pesticide is affecting their immune system. You need to stick to ARS for actual science on the topic.
3 · Share

rose tea · Ellen Kayser · 3 days ago
I read about the Round up and other products from Monsanto contributed the damages to our environment almost 20 years ago, here is another new found and proof for bees:
[www.naturalnews.com/046789_Rou...](#)

Sep 7, 2014 · Tags: Roundup, honeybees, colony collapse disorder ... at sub-lethal levels, meaning levels that don't necessarily kill bees but that still affect ...
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Rational Discourse · rose tea · 3 days ago
That study is essentially junk science. The researchers forced feed sugar water contaminated with glyphosate to honey bees. The problem is that glyphosate is an herbicide (weed-killer) that is applied to weeds before they bloom. Thus bees are not likely to be ingesting any glyphosate under natural conditions.
2 · Share

Shark · Rational Discourse · 2 days ago
By the way, "natural conditions" would mean not using Round Up at all.
 · Share

Shark · Rational Discourse · 2 days ago
I see neighbors spraying roundup on blooming "weeds" all the time. Bees get poisoned by herbicides and pesticides frequently by people who don't care to read the instructions on Round-up or just don't care about bees.
 · Share

Jim Gordon · rose tea · 3 days ago
Natural News is an activist disinformation site of the worst sort. All the worst and fully disproven myths and conspiracy theories are celebrated there and any attempts to post actual truths and peer reviewed citations on their sites are banned. It is literally ground zero for genetic illiteracy!

In addition all those sites and the organic disinformation machine behind them have been rendered impotent when the GMO debate was ended on May 16th 2016 by release of the definitive NAS study. This led to the token QR code bill signed by Obama. Science won, conspiracy theorists lost.

GE crop science has been proven no more damaging than any other farming method including organic. All farming and gardening is invasive to nature.
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