

Happiness is a Horizontal Hive

Dean Houghton

Dr Leonid Sharashkin is a scholar and a scientist. Born in Russia, he received a master's degree in natural resources from Indiana University as well as a doctorate in forestry from the University of Missouri. He is the author of world-renowned research in sustainable agriculture, with his studies cited in testimony to the US Congress and used in drafting forestry legislation in the European Union.

So, you might be taken aback when Sharashkin – known in beekeeping circles as “Dr Leo” – starts quoting Winnie-the-Pooh. But when you think about it, Pooh Bear was quite the expert on “hunny”, spending the majority of his time wandering through the mystical Hundred-Acre Wood in search of the delicacy. Dr Leo has his own magical 80 acres of Ozark forestland that serves as a homestead for himself, his wife, Irina and their family: daughters Lada, Vereya, and Zaryana, and son Yarosvet. Dr Leo “retired” from his life as a researcher in 2008; the word is in quotes because his current workload keeps him as busy as a bee.

Dr Leo depends entirely on bees to support his growing family: their Ozark homestead is devoted to natural beekeeping methods, housing bees in horizontal hives. The industrial style of beekeeping common in the USA calls for a vertical approach, stacking “supers” that may eventually contain 32 kg honey. “It is not good for your back, or for your joints,” Dr Leo points out. “And it is disruptive to the bees as it disturbs the integrity of their home.”

Dr Leo prefers a method of keeping bees that involves



Leo Sharashkin, known as “Dr Leo,” keeps bees with a smile

a step back in time. His apiary features six styles of horizontal hives, easy to build and low-maintenance structures that trace their origins to a French beekeeper, Georges de Layens, who introduced the idea in 1864.

The natural approach to beekeeping is defined by what it is not: the bees are never fed on sugar, there is no changing of the size of the nest with brood boxes and supers, no use of drugs or chemicals of any kind, no queen excluders or re-queening. “Until about 100 years ago, all beekeepers used the natural approach,” Dr Leo says. “There had been no chemicals used for thousands of years as humans cared for their bees.”

Dr Leo’s mentor in this approach is Fedor Lazutin, a noted Russian natural beekeeper and author of *Keeping Bees with a Smile: a vision and practice of natural apiculture**. Fedor brought back the millennia-old tradition where the beekeeper’s primary tasks were limited to providing bees with an ideal habitat and



Designed for the backyard beekeeper, horizontal hives are a friendly fit for honey bees and eliminate the need for heavy lifting during honey harvest



Honey bees enter the sturdy, well-insulated hive



Natural beekeeping involves a minimal amount of hive visits during the year

harvesting surplus honey once a year.

Lazutin taught a series of classes on natural beekeeping in the USA during a 2014 visit: "People had a hard time believing it could be so simple," he says.

"The ingrained stereotype paints beekeeping as a labour-intensive, day-in/day-out chore that is all but incompatible with any other activity. Beekeeping is portrayed as an extremely complex profession, one that requires years of training."

Dr Leo is determined to rewrite that image of beekeeping as a form of drudgery: "Following these methods, keeping bees can be simpler than growing



An Ozark forest is the setting for the apiary on the Sharashkin's homestead



Horizontal hives allow for minimal disturbance of the hive, allowing bees to remain calm and easy to work with

tomatoes," he asserts. "But that is not the experience that you hear people describe at beginner beekeeping classes. They buy equipment and protective clothing, order bee packages, install them in hives, treat against parasites and diseases, and feed the bees in the fall (autumn). Then the bees do not survive the first winter, so the cycle repeats itself."

Even the most experienced beekeepers sometimes just give up. There are only half as many bee colonies in the USA today as there were in 1940.

That is why Dr Leo believes a number of people are looking to rediscover a simpler form of beekeeping: "There are ways to avoid many of the chores and complexities we have been taught to take for granted," he says.

The hive design itself is a key: a Layens hive typically contains 20 large (33 x 41 cm) frames on one level; the number of frames can be fewer or greater depending on the local honey flow. The frame's shape and large size promotes good wintering and strong spring build-up.

Dr Leo says: "These horizontal hives keep all the frames at the same level, allowing the backyard beekeeper to add or remove frames with a minimal amount of disturbance to the bees, keeping them calm and easy to work with; as a bonus. There are never heavy supers to lift."

Horizontal hives are loaded with additional frames during the spring inspection, then opened in the autumn (fall) for honey harvest. That is a considerably different approach from today's common advice to look in hives every two weeks. Dr Leo says that a prominent French beekeeper, Jean Hurpin, modifies some of his Layens hives to enable him to manage the bees with only one visit a year. "Harvesting honey becomes my sole task," Hurpin says.

Leo hosts workshops at his apiary in the Ozarks as well as other locations, sharing knowledge about natural beekeeping as well as hands-on woodworking tips on how to construct horizontal hives and swarm traps. He served as the English edition editor for *Keeping bees with a smile* as well as Layens' *Keeping bees in horizontal hives: a complete guide to apiculture**.

Those books can be ordered by visiting Dr Leo's website www.HorizontalHive.com. A treasure trove of information about natural beekeeping, including free hive plans.

Dr Leo and his family are devoted to earth-friendly living in the Ozark Mountains. He manages approximately 40 hives, all of which are composed of survivor stock obtained by catching wild swarms: "It really helps to start with local bees that are adapted to your local conditions. If you buy a package of bees commercially, they may do well during the summer months, but not fare well in winter."

Dr Leo says: "Our major nectar source is sumac. It produces an awesome honey with orangey flavour, lemon zest overtones, and a tingling wintergreen sensation to your tongue."

The homestead in the Ozarks is more than a place to keep bees and produce honey. It is a place for the Sharashkin family to develop their own roots. Dr Leo and Irina met in Moscow while attending a prestigious business school: they tried farming on a small acreage in Russia but found it too restrictive. The Ozarks, a place that Dr Leo became familiar with during his work at the University of Missouri, offered room to grow. He assisted in the homebirth of the children, and they are being home schooled in the Russian language, as a way to connect to their family origins. "We have adopted the Ozarks as our second home," Dr Leo says.

It is part of being in tune with nature. "De Layens wrote



The family decorate their horizontal hives with colourful scenes

that we cannot improve beekeeping by going farther and farther away from the bee's natural tendencies," Dr Leo fully agrees!

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Since horizontal hives allow removal of one frame at a time, even 5-year old Zaryana can help with honey harvest

