



Slovenian-Style Home, Sweet Home

How to enjoy happier bees and better honey harvests with less work!

By Amy Grisak

Anyone who has hefted a full honey super off the hive knows that beekeeping is hard work. Many days are spent in the hot sun dealing with bees that aren't exactly thrilled you just removed the roof off their home. It's a hobby that only those with a healthy level of physical prowess can continue for the long haul. That is, unless you take a page from Slovenian beekeepers.



Suzanne Brouillette's Slovenian bee house in Harrisville, New Hampshire, containing AŽ hives decorated with 1800s-style Slovene bee panels.

“There is no nation in the world that holds beekeeping as dear as Slovenia.”

PHOTOS BY SUZANNE BROUILLETTE



THE SLOVENIAN WAY

For centuries Slovenian beekeepers, who live in the land indigenous to the renowned Carniolan honey bee, built structures to house the unique Slovenian hive. These bee houses are examples of how an old technique may revolutionize modern beekeeping.

“The houses are very appealing,” said Mark Simonitsch, one of the first people to introduce this way of beekeeping to the States. “I would go to Slovenia to be with my cousins, and thought some beekeepers would want to do this.” He thinks that the bee houses are charming, very organized, and good for the bees, since they offer protection from the



ABOVE: Suzanne Brouillette and Mark Simonitsch at the winter meeting of the Massachusetts Beekeepers Association with info on AŽ beekeeping.

LEFT: Opening one of the hives to inspect the colony, one frame at a time. It looks just like a finely built cupboard.

BELOW: Biodynamic beekeeper Karl Vogrinic's apitherapy bee house, where people can breathe therapeutic bee air.





Bee Home Evolution

Honeybees know no political boundaries. For centuries, tending to native honeybees has been the way of life for people living south of Austria, now known as Slovenia. Historically, this bee-focused culture harvested honey and other bee products from the feral colonies residing in trees along the edge of the forest, often cutting down the trees and destroying the resident hive in the process.

As people cut down trees to create more agricultural fields, Mark said, "The edge of the forest was farther and farther away from their homes." When the sawmill was developed he explained that they were able to build more mobile hives, which allowed beekeepers to bring bees closer to the farms and to crops. Throughout the years, they refined these hives to make them more efficient and healthier for the bees.

Much of what we know today in modern beekeeping is credited to the observations of Slovenian beekeeper and teacher Anton Janša who lived from 1734 to 1773, and whose birthday of May 20 is the proposed date for World Bee Day. His work further developed the bee house, stacking hives within them, and the practice of painting the fronts of the hives so the bees could identify their colony.

Less than a century later, Anton Žnideršič (1874-1947) developed what is considered the Slovenian beehive. Since the Slovenians understood the importance of moving hives to meet the nectar flow, these hives, which are built to be housed in a structure Janša devised, were critical to this method of beekeeping. Originally backpacked to the appropriate locations, the practice eventually evolved into utilizing small huts that could be moved from place to place.

Just like the Slovenian people, the Slovenian hive and bee houses are neat, orderly, and efficient. Since there's no need to change what works so well, most Slovenians still utilize this ingenious design that allows people of all physical capabilities to tend their bees. —Amy Grisak



Suzanne on her bed above her hives. She will soon be offering apitherapy with bee air.



The inside of an apitherapy bee house, where you relax while breathing in bee air through a mask connected to the back of the hive. Bee air helps with breathing problems, stress and sleep issues.



Frames in an AŽ hive can be inserted upside down to allow the bees to draw out comb in other areas.

Working inside of a bee house is fabulous. Everything is there. You're out of the hot sun, and you're out of the rain."

elements and potential predators.

"They go from being very simple to being a weekend home, complete with living quarters," explained Suzanne Brouillette of Slovenian Beekeeping, LLC, who now takes groups from throughout the world on beekeeping tours of Slovenia. For years during her career working for the U.S. Army, she set up travel plans for the troops, and fell in love with Slovenia, the people, and their beekeeping culture. In civilian life, she thought that taking bee enthusiasts on tours was one way to make it back to this beloved country. Then she discovered Mark was already doing so. Since Mark had plenty of irons in the fire, he turned the business over to her.

Along with organizing the tours, Suzanne also imports the authentic and genuine Slovene hives from a family run factory in Slovenia and has the only Slovenian bee store in the States. She and Mark want to introduce beekeepers from throughout the world to this ingenious and beautiful style of managing bees.

"There is no nation in the world that holds beekeeping as dear as Slovenia," said Mark.

"Slovenia is the size of New Hampshire, and has 10,000 beekeepers. They teach beekeeping in the schools, and they have clubs for children," added Suzanne. " (Compare this to the approximately 2,000 bee people in New Hampshire.)

SLOVENIAN SNAPSHOT

There is more to the Slovenian bee houses than the placement of hives within a structure. The Slovenian style hive (also referred to as the AŽ hive for the inventor, Anton Žnideršič), is usually only two deep (although there are three-deep hive options), opens from the back, and features ten frames that have unique characteristics.

One of the key differences in the frames is the concave shape on the top and bottom bars versus the flat wood of the Langstroth design. Instead of hanging by the "ears" of the Langstroth frame in the hive, they



A three-level AŽ hive. A new package of bees was installed so the girls are only in the bottom deep. AŽ hives are usually only two deep. When examining the hive, you check one frame at a time.

rest on three metal bars. "The frames only touch those bars in six places. Therefore, the bees are not inspired to use propolis at those contact places," Mark explained. As a result, disruption to the hives is minimal.

This lack of interference is part of the beauty of the Slovenian style hives. Mark said the beekeepers work

with slow, deliberate movements, focusing on one section of the hive at a time without disturbing the other. To work the hive, the beekeeper swings open the door on the back of the hive, which looks like a finely crafted cupboard. "People refer to one as a piece of furniture," Suzanne said. They are that pretty.

Inside there are two levels, similar in appearance to the double hive bodies in a Langstroth hive. There is a screen over each level allowing the beekeeper to work one with minimal disturbance to the other. The beekeeper can access one level at a time, carefully sliding out one frame for inspection, instead of pulling off numerous levels to reach the bottom box. One frame can be supported by holding the two opposite corners and be turned completely around for a quick look. Or, if the beekeeper needs to relocate a frame or pull several to take a look at them, a piece of equipment called a hive stand is usually nearby to hold the frames until they're ready to be replaced.

SMOKE STICKS

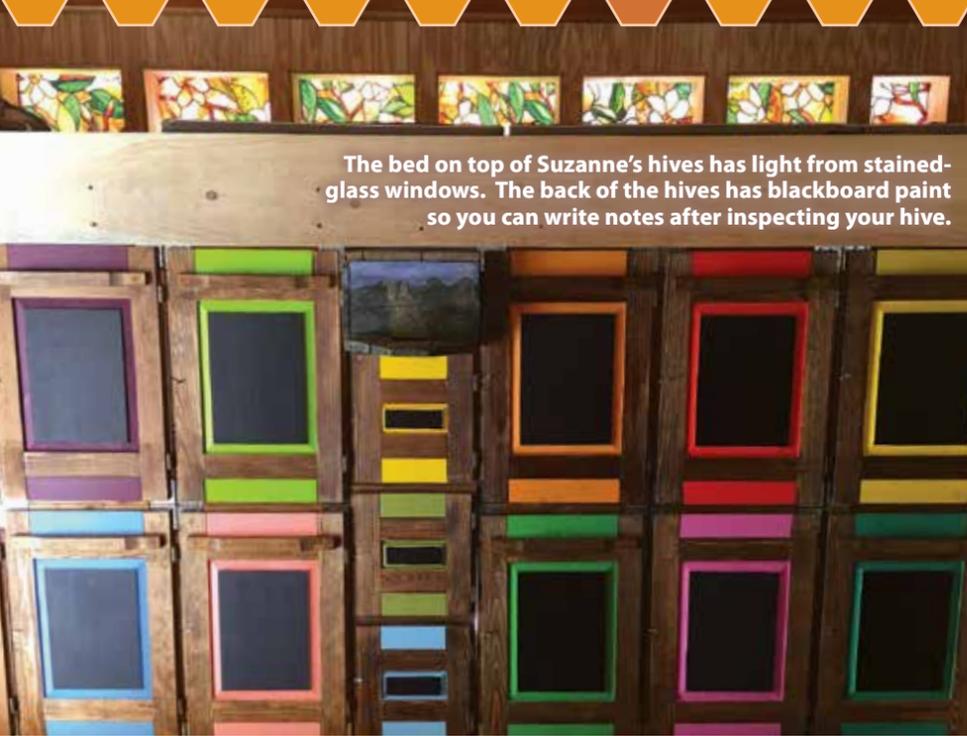
A hive table is typically attached to the bottom of the hive and serves as a handy shelf. Instead of the fussy smoker many American beekeepers use, the Slovenians use a simple smoke stick, approximately the size of a cigar that is lit and set on the hive table to provide a small amount of

smoke to the hive. It is a modern day contrivance based upon the traditional smoke used in Slovenia.

"A smoke stick is the coolest thing in the world. It is made of processed wood chips. It's not glued," Mark said. "Or the old timers love to go into the woods and use a particular fungi or lichen, and they will use that for smoke." He noted that since the bees are native to forested areas, there seems to be a relationship between the fungi and the bees. Using this natural item appears to provide an effective calming mechanism.

Because the Slovenian frames aren't suspended like they are in the Langstroth hive, they can be reinserted upside down to allow the bees to draw out comb in other areas of the frame. This allows the beekeeper to better manage how efficiently and evenly comb is built.

Unlike the traditional American method of honey harvest where supers are removed and honey is extracted all at once, pulling honey from the Slovenian hives is a more gradual process. When a frame is over two-thirds full of capped honey it can be removed, and the frame replaced with an empty one. Beekeepers who scrape and strain honey can handle a few frames at a time. But those who prefer to use a powered extractor need to hold onto a number of frames until they have a large enough batch to make process-



The bed on top of Suzanne's hives has light from stained-glass windows. The back of the hives has blackboard paint so you can write notes after inspecting your hive.



Above right: The bee table is very useful while inspecting, so the bees do not fall to the floor and can easily return to the hive.

Right: The smoke stick provides enough smoke to use within the AŽhive. It is a great no-hassle way to smoke your hive.



ing them all worthwhile. As long as the frames are protected from pests or predators, they can be stored until there is enough honey to harvest.

IT'S A HAPPY HOME

Besides the ingenious design of the Slovenian hive, the bee house itself provides an ideal climate to work with bees. Gone are the days of standing in the hot sun, or on the flip side, dealing with gray, drizzling periods or extensive wind. The bee house creates a comfortable and practical place to handle the bees. "Working inside a bee house is fabulous," Suzanne said. "Everything is there. You're out of the hot sun, and you're out of the rain."

Bee houses can be all shapes and sizes, ranging from a small structure housing a couple of hives to dozens in a large building. Everything is neat, tidy, and geared towards the health of the bees. The roof line on the front of the hive provides shade on the entrances during the hottest part of the day.

"You have to remember that bees

are a forest animal. They lived on the edge of the forest in a tree with shade," Mark said. "If you have your (Langstroth) bee hive with a metal top, the inside of your hive on an August day will be very warm." As a result, the bees have to bring in water to keep the hive cool as it evaporates. By housing the bees in the bee house and protecting the hives from the full sun, you are helping them maintain a desirable temperature in the hive and they don't have to shift resources from carrying nectar to bringing in water.

The bee house also offers protection in the winter. Depending on the severity of the climate, it can be fur-

ther insulated to preserve honey and lessen the effort put forth by the bees to maintain an adequate internal hive temperature even during the harshest weather.

Another appealing aspect of the bee house is its structural beauty. Throughout the centuries, beekeepers have decorated the outside of the hives with painted panels often depicting religious, funny, or narrative scenes. Besides being standing works of art, the shapes and colors of the designs allow the bees to know their hive. "Some people have hired people to paint murals on the front," said Suzanne. She offers decorative panels



that are hand-painted in Slovenia.

This old world method is catching on in America. "This is really, really new to the States," she said. But as more beekeepers discover the benefits of this style, they are willing to implement it in their own apiaries.

LESS WORK, MORE HONEY

Suzanne has been a beekeeper for seven years. She soon figured out that the traditional American method of raising bees was hard work. "The big problem with the Langstroth (hives) is that the boxes are heavy and you're in a sweat suit. Thousands of bees are mad at you because you ripped the roof off their house." After spending winters stacking straw bales around her hives and wrapping them in tarps to pull them through the season at her New Hampshire home, she said, "This wasn't working for me. I fantasized about having a bee house. My good friend Milo built one for me."

Mark, who started beekeeping after spending 40 years as a commercial fisherman, said the Slovenian method was the only way he could continue the activity after five shoulder surgeries. "I'm 76 and am still beekeeping. I never lift more than a full frame that

weighs 5 or 6 pounds."

"One of the benefits of this style of beekeeping is that everyone can do it," said Suzanne. "You can build your bee house to accommodate your needs. This opens up beekeeping to everyone."

Suzanne is also seeing a growing trend of apitherapy during her trips to Slovenia where special bee houses are being built to allow visitors to rest above the hives. The fragrant air, calming sound of the bees, and warmth of the hives are purported to help with respiratory issues, migraines, stress, and depression. If nothing else, it is a relaxing place to rest and recharge. Beekeepers typically do not change rapidly, but Mark and Suzanne believe that once people understand the benefits of the Slovenian style hives and bee houses, many beekeepers will adopt these proven methods for the benefit of the bees, as well as themselves. To learn more, visit slovenianbeekeeping.com or email beeslovenia@gmail.com

This bee wagon used to be pulled by horse to move it to different nectar flows. Today bee trucks, buses and trailers are used.