

The Extractor



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From your Editor Netia Lascelles
Email netia@netialascelles.com
Tel: 01844 344007

The Scout Bee

As this my last edition of The Extractor, I have allowed myself to write a piece on my favourite bee in the colony - the heroic scout bee.

A forager suppresses all individual will in her service of the colony. She gets her work instructions for the day communicated to her on the dance floor. She knows exactly where she will find nectar and other forage before she leaves the hive. Julien Francon's experiments show that a forager will even ignore a dish of syrup laid in her path - unless a scout bee has previously advertised it to her.

So who are these scout bees - these entrepreneurs given *carte blanche* to make decisions on behalf of the colony, the Anita Roddicks of the bee world? According to Seeley in "The Wisdom of the Hive" scout bees number maybe two hundred at the most. They emerge from the same mould as their sisters and perform the same sequence of functions during early life. They may be experienced or

novice foragers, but suddenly they decide to stop taking orders and start to work alone.

The scout bee is intelligent. If the colony needs nectar, she must fly from flower to flower tasting and making judgements about food value and distance travelled. Having found a good source, she returns to the colony to communicate this information. Now she forgets her habitual modesty and takes to the dance floor as a solo artist. She throws herself into her role, running and circling in an exact display of where the forage is to be found. She even adjusts her dance to allow for change in the angle of the sun to hive. More clever still, she dances at the time the plant is secreting, only advertising it in the afternoon for example if it is an afternoon-secreting flower.



The scout bee (centre) performs her famous dance

But her most important role is to find a new home for the swarming colony. What a responsibility! When the moment comes, the swarm usually gathers in a cluster for a while on a bush near the hive. In this position the bees hold a summit meeting - where to

go next? On the face of the cluster, a few scout bees describe the best accommodation to be found in the area. The most enthusiastic dancer draws most of the onlookers and the others gradually stop. The decision has been made, and soon off they fly in an ecstasy of excitement. The scout bee has had her fifteen minutes of fame.

In the bee colony the scout bee is the explorer, the risk taker and solo performer. She is set apart by her creative intelligence and leadership qualities - one of nature's originals.

Editor



Bees not so busy at Chelsea

Gardening is right in fashion at the moment - and so, it seems, are bees. Several stands at the Chelsea Flower Show this year were featuring them. The Fortnum and Mason garden was planning a daring display starring four active hives of bees with bee-friendly plants, until it was pulled at the last moment by the organisers. The garden's designer Robert Myer's protested that bees wouldn't harm anyone...hmm With 157,000 visitors tramping noisily in front of them for a week, loudspeakers and flash photography, would you risk it?

The life of a honey importer

I found myself sitting next to a retired honey importer at lunch the other day and almost prevented the man eating anything, I had so many questions to ask him.

He told me that the English eat only 1lb of honey per head at a rough estimate, and even so, 86% of it has to be imported, so there is quite a role for honey merchants. His company was based in the City, one of only two in Britain - and only two in the US as well.

The job involved travelling the world, tasting everything from acacia honey from Hungary to leatherwood honey from Tasmania, and then persuading people to buy it, praising its flavour, its texture, its aftertaste - a bit like wine really.

Thirty years ago Australian eucalyptus honey was judged inedible in the American trade, and

he feels that he was responsible for turning thinking round to see the advantage of its rather assertive taste, especially in cooking.

Thirty years ago the Eurozone didn't figure as a legislative force, but even then Germany was the country to reckon with, testing every shipment for pollen count and adulteration. Mexicans don't export to Germany any more because of the bureaucracy. There were cases of fraud, but my friend said: "In my experience the beekeeper is among the most honest of men - and women!" VL

Ouch!

An Amazonian marriage ritual requires the male to put a bamboo filled with stinger bees over his member to increase its size, according to The Week magazine. This exercise was once tried by Mick Jagger, apparently, with unreported results.