

Honey Shows, Part 1: The Value of Showing Honey and Beeswax

by Brutz English

I love honey shows! I find honey shows to be fun, exciting, and often full of wonderful surprises! I personally enjoy the challenge of planning, organizing, and putting together honey shows almost as much as I love judging exhibits! I wish more beekeeping clubs and associations, especially at the local level, would host more honey shows each year. I believe a honey show is one of the most valuable activities a local beekeeping club can incorporate into its annual schedule of events, and I'm going to take a few paragraphs and explain to you why that is.

Let's start off with a not-so-straightforward question, what is the fundamental purpose of having a honey show? Now lots of things come to mind. Honey shows are fun, competitive events for club members. Honey shows provide a venue for beekeepers to show off their products and skills. Honey shows provide beekeeping clubs and organizations an opportunity to recognize their members' achievements. Honey shows can be a great tool for public outreach and generating publicity. All of those are among many perfectly valid reasons for an organization to put on a honey show. However, I submit to you there is something more... an even better, more valuable reason to have a honey show. Consider this from the standpoint of beekeeping education, what if the purpose of the honey show is to teach beekeepers how to be better producers of hive products? And what if I told you THAT made better beekeepers out of honey show exhibitors? In fact, a honey show can be (or certainly can be a part of) the most practical, enduring, and comprehensive educational program your beekeeping club or association offers throughout the year, and year after year.

Good honey shows have an instructional element inherently built into them, and good honey judges want to help exhibitors improve and do better. Most honey shows use a judging or scoring system that provides the exhibitor with some level of feedback on their exhibit(s). Usually this is a score sheet or comment card that spells out what was wrong or why the exhibit was marked down. Hopefully, the comment card or score sheet offers some constructive criticism as to what the exhibitor might improve on going forward. Many honey show exhibitors want the feedback from the judge more than they want ribbons and awards. Meaningful feedback, given in a positive, constructive way does two things: one, it educates the exhibitor, giving them valuable instruction and direction; and two; it motivates the exhibitor to keep at it, and make the necessary adjustments and improvements to pursue greater success at future honey shows. The result is with each successive year we see the same exhibitor(s) presenting vastly improved hive product(s).

Not only do we see exhibitors improving on the items they brought last time, but we constantly see exhibitors expanding their range of products year after year. The first year or two an exhibitor will bring in some extracted honey. Then after a few shows that exhibitor will show up with some creamed honey, or maybe an exhibit of comb honey. A year or two after that they will enter a wax block or a bottle of mead. We find people who exhibit in honey shows

tend to rapidly diversify their product offerings. They not only use the feedback they get from the judges at the honey shows, but they also study and research on their own how to make new things between shows. These individuals spend this extra time and effort studying, learning, and honing their skills between honey shows so they can be prepared for, and be successful at, the next honey show!

Now you might say, all this self-improvement is fine and dandy for the individual exhibitors, but how does all of that benefit my beekeeping club or association? I hope the answer is self-evident. Any honey show exhibitor with any measurable experience will tell you very quickly, one cannot hope to produce winning honey show exhibits without access to the highest quality honey and beeswax. The only way to get honey and beeswax worthy of showing is by maintaining healthy, robust colonies of honeybees. Hence, to be a successful exhibitor, one has to become a pretty good beekeeper. Much of the study and self-improvement I described in the previous paragraph is devoted to better beekeeping practices and management. Success at the show bench starts in the bee yard. One must learn the appropriate and proper methods of harvesting, extracting, processing, packaging, and handling all manner of hive products. Ultimately, honey shows serve to make more competent, well trained, and all-around better beekeepers!

If you are big-picture person, there is a trickle-down effect to all of this. Almost every beekeeper produces something from their hives. Maybe it's honey? Maybe it candles? Maybe it's lip balms? It doesn't matter what we're producing. What does matter is almost all of us give away or sell some of what we produce to someone else be it a family member, a friend, or a neighbor. By participating in honey shows, exhibitors learn to make higher-quality products. When we distribute those superior products to others out in our communities, they (our consumers) develop an appreciation for the high-quality hive products we have provided. That creates and raises consumer confidence in our local hive produce, which in turn elevates the value and importance of beekeeping and honeybees within our local communities.

There you have it. All the information you need to convince your local beekeeping club or association to put on a honey show! In my next article I am going to explain exactly how to put a honey show together. Don't fear, it need not be a gargantuan task, nor does it necessarily take a Herculean effort. A local honey show can be as simple and informal as your club wants it to be. I will go over the basics and provide links and resources to help put a great honey show together!

Brutz English is a Senior Welsh Honey Judge from Georgia. He has been judging honey shows for over ten years. He has judged more than fifty state, national, and international level honey shows and scores of local honey shows over his judging career. He is the Program director for the Welsh Honey Judge training program at the Young Harris-UGA Beekeeping Institute, and a founding member of the American Honey Show Training Council. He can be reached via email at brutzenglish@gmail.com.