



## Where are the Honeybees?

Everywhere I go people are asking more questions about honeybees. They want to know where the honeybees have gone. Many people have told me that they didn't have any honeybee activity in their gardens this spring. Some have resorted to using a small paintbrush to pollinate some of their vegetable crops.

Honeybees pollinate numerous crops in the United States valued annually in excess of \$14.6 billion. According to information from Dr. John Skinner, Bee Expert with UT Extension, the value of crops benefitting from pollination exceeds \$119 million annually right here in the state of Tennessee. Dr. Skinner's research has indicted that diseases and pests, especially two parasitic mites have caused annual losses in some years averaging 50%.

A study on bee health released in May by USDA suggested a host of factors are contributing to the rising death toll of honeybees. Those include para-sites and disease, poor honeybee nutrition and a lack of genetic diversity among bee colonies. It was also suggested in the report that exposure to pesticides may play a role in killing bees, but noted that additional research is needed.

Anytime you mention pesticides and honeybees, it is a high-profile issue. Many environmental groups and local beekeepers are actively protesting agriculture companies that produce everything from pesticides to genetically modified seeds. The bee issue is a major one for the protesters.

According to the new report on bee health, a parasitic mite – the Varroa destructor – remains the "single most detrimental pest of honey bees" and a major reason for the declining bee colonies. The mites can kill the bees and researchers have found viruses that also play a role. Bees are known to carry viruses from plant to plant.

Whatever the reason may be, the rising honeybee death toll is a serious matter. It is one that we have to pay close attention too. It not only affects large-scale agriculture but backyard gardeners as well. If you would like more information about bees and beekeeping here in Memphis, the Memphis Area Beekeepers Association meets every second Monday of the month at 7:00 pm at the Agricenter Concourse C – Banquet Room. The public is welcome. Until next time, happy gardening!



*Christopher Conzel*