

# Honeybee swarms are only frightening in the movies

BY LEE BELANGER  
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You've no doubt heard the expression, "She's a queen bee."

The queen in a honeybee hive is one pampered female. She lives with up to 50 fertile males, but mates with them only outside the hive. She stores sperm so she can self-fertilize eggs throughout the year.

A honeybee colony usually supports only one queen. Living along with the queen and the males, which are called drones, are several thousand infertile

the queen is in the new hive, the other bees follow her.

Call the Florida Department of Agriculture for a list of local beekeepers.

Swarms are much less dangerous than active hives. Bees protect hives that contain honey stores and young bees. Swarms have neither, so unless the bees are provoked, they are unlikely to sting.

Foraging bees, or those collecting nectar and pollen, are different from a swarm. They fly from flower to flower and generally do not sting unless disturbed. Although you may see many bees foraging in one spot, their purpose is



LEE BELANGER / COURTESY PHOTO

This honeybee swarm was photographed in Lee County earlier this spring.

female worker bees. They do all the work in the hive, including feeding the queen.

When hives are overcrowded or the queen ages, bees begin to swarm. This means some of the bees leave the hive for a new home. Although Hollywood has depicted swarms as frightening sights, swarming is a natural, annual occurrence in a honeybee colony.

Overcrowding usually occurs in spring, when nectar is readily available and the worker bees feed young worker larvae royal jelly, which produces several daughter queens. Then the original queen flies away with as many as 60 percent of the workers.

A swarm may contain up to 30,000 bees that cluster on a tree branch or a manmade object while scout bees look for a suitable site for a new hive. Bees stay in the swarm because the queen emits a chemical called a pheromone that "tells" the bees to stay with her while a new home site is found.

Usually the swarm moves in a few days. Until then, the bees survive on honey they ate before leaving the hive.

Bees settle in hollow trees or even in walls in houses. If you find bees settled in a wall, don't spray to kill them. As the insecticide decays, the honeycomb attracts future swarms. Also, honey and the honeycomb will melt and stain your walls.

If you find bees settled in a wall, you will need to hire a beekeeper to remove the swarm and a carpenter to repair your wall. Beekeepers capture swarms by placing an empty beehive on the ground below the swarm. They may smoke the swarm to calm them. The bees are gathered and placed in the new hive. Once

quite different from that of a swarm.

If you want to discourage foraging bees, it's good to know that they are attracted to bright colors other than red and to perfume and sweet-smelling aftershave. Any sugar source will also tempt them — ripening fruit, soda cans and, of course, flowers.

Honeybees sting only when necessary because after stinging, they die. As a child, I was stung on several occasions when walking barefoot through fields of flowers where bees were foraging. (It took several stings to remind me to look down while walking.) I learned that the stinger should be scraped away with a sharp object or fingernail. Pinching the stinger only injects more venom in the skin.

If you are ever chased by bees, do not try to fool them by ducking down and hiding. They will keep attacking when you are near their hive. Run in a zigzag pattern through brush if possible and then into a building.

Most bee stings are little more than a nuisance. However, some people are highly allergic and can die from anaphylactic shock resulting from a single sting.

Honeybees are a necessity to our way of life. Just imagine life without tomatoes, beans and many other fruits and vegetables dependant on bees for pollination. Livestock that depend upon bee-pollinated forage plants like clover would disappear. In fact, bees pollinate about one-sixth of the world's flowering plants and more than 300 agricultural plants.

Love them or curse them, we simply can't live without honeybees. ■

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