



Come spring, honeybees along Colorado's Front Range emerge from their winter slumber. They seek out the first flush of blossoms, deterred only by the occasional late spring snow. And local beekeepers are close behind, slipping into their white jumpsuits to check on their charges, anxious to learn if they made it through the winter.

In winters past, a beekeeper could hope to find all of her colonies healthy and happy. But since the arrival of the parasitic varroa mite in the late eighties, honeybees—and their keepers—have been struggling. The mite affects virtually every managed colony of European honeybees, and greater winter losses are now the norm. “It’s typical to lose about 30 percent,” explains Laura Tyler of Boulder’s Backyard Bees.

Before the European honeybee, *Apis mellifera*, came to dominate the North American landscape, thousands of different species of native bees pollinated flowers and food crops. But suburban sprawl and industrial agriculture have largely displaced the natives. And because of their disappearance, our crops—including Colorado’s Eastern Plains alfalfa and Western Slope stone fruit—depend more heavily than ever on the services of the European honeybee. In fact, pollination contracts—not honey—have become the modern beekeepers’ primary source of income: Every year, most of the country’s commercial bees are hauled from coast to coast on the backs of 18-wheelers, from California’s almond orchards to Maine’s blueberry fields, in constant pursuit of the bloom.

Recently, however, European honeybees have made headlines—and the news is grim. Beekeepers across the country have suited up in spring only to find their hives inexplicably empty. While some bee-

keepers have been spared, the mysterious new ailment, Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), has caused devastating losses.

Tom Theobald of Niwot Honey Farm has been keeping bees and harvesting honey for the past 33 years. Early on, his colonies were growing faster than he could manage. Now, he struggles to maintain his target of 100 hives. “Last winter, my losses were 45 percent” he says, pained. “This winter, they’re going to run over 70 percent. I may be looking at the end.”

But according to Tom, CCD is not a recent phenomenon. “I’ve been seeing what they’re describing as CCD ever since the varroa mite showed up,” he says. Possible causes of CCD—viruses, pesticides, parasites, genetically modified crops, and even cell phones—have come under investigation, but no specific culprit has been found. “I think we are going to find multiple causes,” says Tom.

Tom credits local hobbyist beekeepers with the maintenance of feral colonies along the Front Range. Feral bees are European honeybees that have escaped their human beekeepers. “Even the best beekeepers will occasionally lose a swarm, and that helps regenerate the environment,” he explains.

Corwin Bell and Karen Sadenwater, founders of Backyard Hive in Eldorado Springs, make handcrafted beehives. They hope more and more Coloradans will give honeybees a home in their own backyards. “We want more people to care about bees,” says Karen. If commercial bees continue to suffer, we may come to rely on backyard beehives to preserve an invaluable natural resource. And, we may need to pay more attention to those native bees that we’ve overlooked for so long.

# BEE LEAGUERED

BY VERONICA HIRSH VOLNY

Help make your community a better place for native bees, honeybees and local beekeepers:

- Keep bees in mind when selecting plants for your garden. Plant native flowers such as Rocky Mountain Bee plant, Giant Hyssop, Azure Blue Sage, and Maximilian's Sunflower.
- Sustain bees throughout the growing season by planting a succession of blooms.
- Avoid using pesticides in your garden, and encourage your city to do the same.
- Provide nesting sites for native bees by maintaining bare patches of ground, leaving dead wood on trees, or putting up "bee blocks"—they are inexpensive and easy to make.
- Support beekeepers in your community: buy local honey and beeswax products.
- Become a beekeeper, and enjoy a steady supply of honey from your own backyard.

**Go to [www.ediblefrontrange.com](http://www.ediblefrontrange.com) for a primer on how to become a beekeeper, to find out more about native plants and their bloom times; where to buy and how to make bee blocks for native bees, and local sources for honey and beeswax products.**

After an itinerant childhood in Europe, **Veronica Volny** moved to California to study biology, and received her Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from Stanford University. She now writes, gardens, forages and cooks in Boulder, and is working with friends to organize a series of farm dinners prepared on local farms throughout the summer.

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We recently started making cheeses at our new cheesemaking facility in Ada, Oklahoma. These cheeses are made from milk supplied by family farms located in the rolling hills of southeastern Oklahoma.

Haystack is committed to contributing to the local community and to conducting our business in a sustainable manner. A key aspect of our mission is to educate the general public about goat cheese, animal husbandry and artisanal food production.

For more information visit [www.haystackgoatcheese.com](http://www.haystackgoatcheese.com).

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