

Happiness *from the* hives

It was by pure accident that Mark Rogers discovered the wonders of beeswax – now he and his family are harnessing its powers in a natural range of balms, salves and polishes

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It may be early October, with a cool autumnal sun and lingering morning mist casting a sepia shade over the hilly landscape, but listen carefully and you can still make out a quiet buzz as many of Mark Rogers' thousands of workers gather last-minute supplies of nectar to turn into glistening honey, which will see them through their imminent winter hibernation.

"It's been feeding on ivy," says beekeeper Mark, surveying one insect as it flies into a hive in the five-acre orchard less than a mile from his home in the village of Melplash, Dorset. "You can tell by the smell of the pollen it has just collected." But it's not the pollen Mark is interested in, as he opens up the hive for one final check before the daytime temperatures drop, and his bees are no longer able to venture out. It's not the honey, either – although he is rather partial to a spoonful smothered on his morning toast. Instead, this former arable farmer is eager to see how much wax is left to harvest, as this is the base ingredient of the Filberts Bees salves, balms and polishes that he now makes for a living.

Mark's passion for bees began seven years ago, when an uncle introduced him to the world of apiculture at the age of 23. "I started off with three hives, which I placed on the roof of my workshop where I serviced my agricultural machinery – someone told me it would be a good location," he says. "But the bees didn't like the sound of me welding and grinding beneath them and got aggressive. I was forever getting stung. There wasn't sufficient forage nearby either, so they produced hardly any honey."

They did, however, make wax – masses of it – but it wasn't until two years later, in 2007, when an experiment with a friend to make a honey-based nutrition bar went wrong, that Mark realised the benefits of this natural by-product. "We were heating the ingredients in a pan and the oils, pollens and ▷



THIS PAGE Mark removes the frames from the hives in his orchard before extracting the honey and melting down the beeswax to make natural products. OPPOSITE His partner Freya and mother Philada work for Filberts, too

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waxes were sticking to the sides because they cooled down faster. I had to keep scraping them away with a spatula. I was left with pots of this wonderful-smelling substance, which I gave to friends and family as Christmas presents. The feedback was great and, because I was aware of the success of Badger Balms in the US, I could see the potential of producing something similar here in the UK.”

So, at his mother Philada’s kitchen table (“it was bigger than mine!”), Mark started making a range of lip- and hand-salves, and a furniture polish, experimenting after work and at weekends with different combinations of wax and essential oils until he was happy with the results, and producing just small batches to avoid expensive mistakes.

As business grew – aided by Mark’s enthusiastic selling technique at local fairs and trade shows – he relocated operations to a garden room in Philada’s house, then to an aunt’s studio, and finally a converted barn shed, kitting it out with an extractor and other necessary items “begged, borrowed and swapped” to keep costs down. The process itself, though, remains unchanged. Mark brings the capped, honey-full frames to the shed, where, under the cover of darkness, he scrapes away the waxy top layer with a knife. “If we did it during the day in summer, we’d have a curtain of bees at the window trying to get in because they’d be able to smell it.”

Mark places the oozing frames in an extractor, while the lace-like honeycombs of light wax capping are gently melted down in a steaming device that separates any lasting traces of honey from the wax. Next, he transfers the wax to a cooking pot and warms it to 65-67°C together with ingredients such as Somerset-grown rapeseed oil, linseed oil from West Sussex, Devonshire hemp oil and lavender oil from Hampshire, before pouring the mixture into rows of shiny tins where it sets almost instantly, changing from a golden liquid to a solid buttery substance. The darker wax that forms each individual cell is treated in the same way but kept separately for use in Filberts’ boot and wood polishes.

There are now 58 different items, with the most recent release being a baby balm – inspired by the birth of Mark’s first child Felicity last year. Each one is made by hand in the same way, although now that he has some 100 hives in a ten-mile radius to tend to, it is more often the job of Philada, a former teacher-trainer. “I never imagined that one day I’d be making a living from bees,” she says, >



THIS PAGE, FROM ABOVE
Blocks of wax, the base ingredient in Mark’s products; the packaging has been designed by an artist friend; everything is handmade in small batches; Freya is in charge of the brochures and marketing



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as she rhythmically stirs the melting wax and breathes in its sweet, delicate scent.

Other family members, too, have become involved: Mark's partner Freya looks after photography and the website, having taught herself how to use a camera and Photoshop to compile the brochures; his sister Tessa is setting up an online shop for the company, and a cousin helps out with the accounts. The packaging, meanwhile, is beautifully illustrated by an art graduate and close friend. As demand for their products has grown, Mark has had to supplement the beeswax from his own hives, choosing to source it locally from other Dorset-based beekeepers, who otherwise would have created a "wax mountain" of discards in a corner of their shed or sold it for a minimal fee. For Philada, deliveries are always exciting. "Many beekeepers bring their wax to us in big buckets," she says. "You never know what you're going to get. Wax rich in propolis, a resinous substance used by bees for fixing and strengthening the comb, is like gold dust because it has beneficial antibacterial properties or, as Mark likes to call it, 'bee magic'. We make a special propolis salve to showcase that."

From three hives, Mark now has 50 of his own and a further 50 or so dotted around the county at 15 sites that range from stately homes to people's back gardens. Clad in his white protective bee-suit, he's a familiar sight in the area. In keeping with the Filberts ethos, payment for hosting a hive is by a traditional method – jars of honey – something, which in the past few years, has become a lucrative addition to the business. "Most beekeepers put all their honey into one big vat and heat it up, which can damage the unique properties and flavours. We don't have the space or equipment to do that, so I make small batches, from a couple of frames at a time, simply uncapping them and draining the honey straight into jars – you don't get more natural than that. Each one is specific to a particular site, so I can tell people

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what the bees have foraged on, and I can make seasonal batches, too. Such traceability is a real selling point."

But wax and honey are not the only things on Mark's mind as he starts to close down his hives for the winter. Looking across the orchard, there are burgeoning branches of apples waiting to be harvested – increased pollination being another benefit of keeping bees. From his crop, he'll make cider for the local brewery to keep him busy over the winter, then prune the trees and mill wood for sale as planks. If he has the opportunity to relax with his family, you'll find him spending time in his own garden, planting it up for spring – with bee-friendly forage, of course. 🐝
Filberts Bees, Unit 10, Mellstock Farm, Higher Bockhampton, Dorchester, Dorset (01305 264927; filbertsbees.co.uk). CL readers can receive a 20% discount on purchases made before 30 October 2013.



THIS PAGE, FROM THIS PICTURE
The natural polishes give furniture and shoes an enviable shine and fragrance; Filberts also supplies home items, such as beeswax bars and hand-rolled candles



The Filberts' guide to bee-friendly forage

A passionate apiarist, Mark is keen to encourage gardeners to grow nectar-rich plants



Pollen-rich plants such as snowdrops, crocuses, winter honeysuckle, hellebores, heathers and the hazel bush (from where Filberts gets its name) give bees a protein supply in February, when they need it to build up the colony.



Set aside a patch for dandelions, thistles, deadnettle and buttercups – a nectar source for making winter stores of honey.



Bees can't reach pollen in double flowers, so choose single or semi-double varieties instead.



Trees are important, too – resinous species, including pines, birches and poplars, will give your hive the necessary ingredients to make propolis.



Drifts of plants are easier for bees to find – lavender gives honey a lovely flavour and scent.