

HEADLINE: **Ontario's Bees Dine on Dandelions**

By (Local Beekeeper)

Dandelion honey, a new gourmet food? Well, not exactly, but surprisingly it's the notorious dandelion that gives bees a healthy start after a long winter in the hive.

Ontario's 3,000 beekeepers have been examining their hives to calculate overwintering losses. In the winter of 2010/11, the losses were 43 percent of hives compared to traditional norms of 10 percent.

From October through April, freezing temperatures and lack of forage limit Ontario's bees from venturing out from their hives. If the queen bee dies, the colony is lost. Some beekeepers with overwintering success credit the genetics of their queen bees which are bred to be parasite resistant. Of course, diligent hive management is also key to colony survival.

The health of the Ontario bee industry is a concern to farmers and consumers alike. Consider that every third bite of food is the result of pollination by bees.

That surprising fact is not something we think about while spreading honey on breakfast toast. How often do we give credit to bees which pollinate everything from alfalfa to zucchini?

Bees transfer pollen from the anthers of a flower to the stigma of the same flower or another plant. Pollination is needed to fertilize the plant so that it can develop seeds. Wind moves the pollen for some plants such as grasses. Others need to have the physical transfer of pollen by an insect which is usually a bee. In Ontario, pollination is key to some fruit and vegetable crops with an estimated worth of \$170 million. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada estimates that the value of pollination to Canadian agriculture is worth more than \$1 billion per year.

Pollination season begins once temperatures reach 10 degrees Celsius. Bees then become active, foraging up to 5 kilometres from the hive for food. Pollen is gathered from early-blooming sources such as pussy willows and alders, then move on to dandelions. This valuable protein, kick starts the bees for a strenuous season, moving from tender fruits in May to vegetables in June and canola in July. In fact, some Ontario hives are transported as

far afield as Quebec and New Brunswick to pollinate blueberries and cranberries.

By late May, the Ontario honey season is well underway. With many farmers' markets opening on Victoria Day weekend, be sure to look for stalls with local honey producers.

With 100 percent Ontario honey in your cupboard, you can incorporate this local ingredient into your menus more often.

We welcome enquiries about 100 percent Ontario honey.

Visit (name of farmer and farm) at (town) by calling (telephone number) or looking up (www.website). (Come to see us at the local farmers' market or the farm. Our hours of operation are:)