

Planet Bee Honey Farm: What's the Buzz About?

By Olivia Nowek

What began as a high school summer job on the prairies of Alberta, Canada would end up influencing the rest of Ed Nowek's life and career. Beekeeping for over 15 years during the 1970s and 80s, Ed was exposed to, and eventually inspired by, the diversity of these tiny insects. Working in places such as Mexico, California, and even Australia, the experiences Ed had in the beekeeping industry infused him with countless amazing stories. Ed developed a passion for sharing his knowledge and life experiences with bees with anyone willing to listen. He soon discovered just how little people seemed to know about these amazing creatures, and the more he shared his stories, the more passionate he became. Although Ed left the industry to pursue jobs in management and retail during his 30s, he never stopped thinking about and sharing his passion for honeybees with others.

During the 1990s, amidst marrying and starting a family, Ed began to think about what he wanted to do, and how he could achieve his goal of a comfortable retirement. When he moved his family from Langley, BC, to the North Okanagan, he was presented with an opportunity to make a fresh start. Now living on a beautiful 10 acre farm in Armstrong, BC, Ed began to consider starting his own business. He wanted to do something he could be successful at, but more importantly something he had a passion for and would enjoy.

Concept Development

Ed's desire to be his own boss, as well as his ambitions of giving back to the community and society finally combined with his goals of sharing his fascination with bees to become an entrepreneurial vision. It wasn't long before Ed settled on his vision for the new start-up business. Ed began contemplating a honeybee tourist attraction and country store, in which education about the amazing world of the honey bee would be the main focus. He believed that people simply did not understand the honeybee enough to move beyond their fear and paranoia, a social problem he believed he could make some progress on. Ed felt as though bees were undervalued and that there was much to be learned about the healing and health benefits of the products of the hive. He recognized a ground swell of interest in alternative health, with the conventional health care system not meeting people's expectations or needs all of the time.

Ed held that humans stood to learn a lot from honeybees. He did, and still does, believe that honeybees prove that together we can achieve much more than as individuals. When you look at what a single bee can accomplish in her lifetime, the production of a single teaspoon of honey, it may seem insignificant. However, by moving beyond self-interest and working collectively, the hive and colony achieve amazing feats. Ed feels that bees exemplify how we are all a part of a larger society, and that sometimes, we need to do what is best for the 'colony', and not only our selves. This concept would shape the development of Ed's new business plan.

Resource Needs and Acquisition

Ed felt that his new property in Armstrong, on 10 agricultural acres, would make the perfect setting for an agri-tourism business. In order to address what he saw as a lack of understanding by the general public towards honeybees, Ed began talking with other beekeepers with business savvy. There was, as he reflects, a false sense of new competition entering the honey and agri-tourism marketplace, but Ed felt that by educating people of the importance of bees, he would benefit the entire industry immensely. He was not there to steal business, he was there to stimulate it for everyone, himself included. In his own words, “I knew that building our business, by educating people, would increase business for our industry...”, and with this belief, he took steps to put his plan into action. After some consultation with previous employers and others in the industry, Ed settled on the idea of Planet Bee Honey Farm, and established the business in 1997, returning to the beekeeping industry once again.

Launch and Growth of the New Venture

Many advised Ed that throwing his life savings into a new business, while raising a young family, was risky. Over the first five years that Planet Bee existed, much of Ed’s life savings was spent getting the business off the ground, and these years did not turn profit. Despite this, Ed never lost his motivation and the belief in the vision behind his business. He enjoyed welcoming the local school children for educational tours and started getting positive feedback from the local community regarding his products and the experience his store offered.

One of the key moments in the history of Planet Bee came when, in 2003, Ed moved the store from the small community of Armstrong (population 5,000) to neighbouring Vernon (population 35,000). Because he truly believed that part of the authentic farm tour experience required the business to continue to be situated on a working farm, he chose the new location for the store amongst operating orchards and wineries. This decision to relocate the relatively young business would prove extremely clever. With a new, larger, community and local market, as well as increased tourist traffic, the business now had access to a much larger group of potential customers, visitors, and beneficiaries to the vision behind Planet Bee. Ed’s perseverance during these first five years, along with an unwavering belief in the concept behind his business, would eventually lead to success beyond his imagination.

Throughout the history of Planet Bee Honey Farm, Ed has continued to introduce new products and to modify his educational tours in order to make them as meaningful as possible. A common thread amongst customer reviews continues to include comments such as ‘I learned so much’, or ‘the staff were so knowledgeable’, affirming Ed’s feeling that he is succeeding in much of his mission.

Goal Attainment and Beyond

Following the relocation in 2003, Planet Bee Honey Farm grew at an unforeseen pace, and this momentum only continues to grow. The store currently offers several types of educational tours, as well as products from the hive Ed believes have health and healing benefits. He has formulated several unique mixtures, such as his Hive Healer Honey, shown to aid people suffering from respiratory ailments and allergies. He also recently launched a unique line of all-natural body care products containing honey, bee pollen, royal jelly, and propolis, labelled 'let it bee'. Encouraged by the success of his various product lines, and with a desire to appeal to broader demographics, Ed began producing and selling his 'Honeymoon Mead' about five years ago. The introduction of honey wine offered a chance to again educate people about this extremely historic alcoholic beverage, allowing people to enjoy another one of the value added hive products.

Recently, the collapse of honeybee colonies around the world and growing fears regarding food security have increased public awareness and concern for these creatures. Like many beekeepers, Ed lost about 80 percent of his colonies in the spring of 2009. Fortunately, he had the financial means to recover those lost hives, unlike many in his struggling industry. Ed was thrilled to be sought out as a source of insight by numerous news agencies during this period, a fact which makes him feel accomplished in his field. He does still feel that there are many things he would like to achieve in terms of improving the position and sustainability of the beekeeping industry today.