



# How to Attract New Members and Retain Experienced Beekeepers:

## The Story of Brown County Beekeepers

by Dave Elsen

**W**hat makes a bee club thrive and not just survive? It's a question we've asked ourselves many times at the Brown County Beekeepers Club in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Like being a beekeeper, managing a bee club requires curiosity, flexibility, and the willingness to adapt to a changing environment. There's no instruction manual, no

"one right way." But after more than a century of supporting beekeepers in Northeast Wisconsin, we've learned a few things about creating a club that people want to join and stay with.

Our journey hasn't been perfect. But it's been purposeful, people-centered, and surprisingly fun. This article shares the key strategies that have helped us grow from a steady 40 members to over 150 strong and counting.

dustry itself, we've evolved. Today, our focus is on hobbyists, first-time beekeepers, and lifelong learners. One thing that's helped: our mission statement. It serves as a compass, not just a formality:

*We are dedicated to promoting sustainable, responsible and healthy beekeeping practices in Northeastern Wisconsin for both experienced and first-time beekeepers. We strive to create a fun environment where learning opportunities exist for association members and the public.*

**At top:** From left to right, Sarah Mueller, Chris Groth, Tom Cashman, Nathan Frailley and Joan Theys work the club booth at the Green Bay Botanical Gardens Fall Festival.

### THE ROOTS — A SOLID FOUNDATION

Founded in 1918, the Brown County Beekeepers originally served commercial beekeepers. But like the in-



**Left:** Bob Michiels and Dave Elsen catch a swarm on video and mentor members on the process. **Right:** Mimi Gerner (far right) and Michelle Riemer (in red) lead activities at Children's Pollinator Camp.

#### LEADERSHIP — FROM BOARD TO BEE YARD

One of the most transformational shifts we made was evolving from a traditional four-person board to a dynamic Leadership Team. This approach brings more ideas to the table, spreads the work, and nurtures future leaders.

We now include informal chairs for Education Outreach, Member-at-Large, Membership, Web, Social Media, and Member Education. Many of these positions are co-chaired to bring additional talent into the fold. We meet several times a year to set goals and review our budget, always with transparency and accountability to the membership.

We also embrace collaboration tools like shared drives, messaging apps, email and Zoom. It's not about being flashy, it's about being effective.

#### MEETINGS THAT MATTER

Early meetings were bogged down by bills and administrative updates. Important, yes, but not energizing. So we made a change.

Now, our 90-minute meetings follow a simple formula: 30 minutes for club business and 60 minutes for education and networking. A big step toward streamlining meetings

was having the Leadership Team set an annual budget which is discussed and approved by the members. If expenditures stay within the budgeted category amount we don't debate expenses. Budget vs. actual spending is reviewed a few times per year.

And because we know the real value comes from learning and connection, we added a pre-meeting social hour. Members arrive early to chat, share what's going on in their apiaries, and swap ideas. That community energy has become part of our club's identity.

COVID tested us in 2020, but we didn't skip a beat. We pivoted to Zoom, helped our members get online, and only missed one meeting all year. That year, our membership jumped from 88 to 129. Today, we still offer an online meeting option. This technology is also used to bring in nationally recognized speakers.

#### EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE — EVERY TIME

Beekeepers join clubs to learn. Our commitment is to make sure there's something for everyone at every meeting, whether it's your first year or twentieth.

Many members start by attending the "Introduction to Beekeeping" class. Basic skills for the first year are

covered. The class culminates with an "At the Hive" session where everyone gets hands-on experience and a chance to do a mite test. This is the club's main source of new members. The course sparks interest and connects people who are just starting their beekeeping journey.

At meetings, education topics are aligned to the season. Our speakers are a mix of experienced members and national voices. In-person presenters are great for hands-on topics like spring and fall management, while Zoom helps us afford high-profile speakers on advanced topics.

We're proud of our mentorship program, which pairs new and experienced beekeepers. This is one of the strongest reasons people stay in the club. One-on-one support really helps and keeps both members and their hives thriving.

Members also love our monthly "Hive Dives," offering hands-on visits to member apiaries to see beekeeping styles in action. As one mentor put it, "The best way to learn is to pop a lid."

#### INNOVATION AND EXPLORATION

We believe learning doesn't stop when the meeting ends. That's why we've developed several unique programs:

- **Hive technology initiative** — Members can receive up to \$100 toward the purchase of innovative beekeeping technologies. Recipients share their learning with the club.
- **Education reimbursement** — Members attending outside seminars can receive \$20 toward their fees. Key takeaways are shared with the club.
- **Interactive learning** — Panels, equipment demos, and 5-minute member apiary updates augment the traditional slideshow monologue. The result? More engagement, better retention.

We've also built a robust online presence. Our Facebook page "Brown County Beekeepers" gets great traffic for the Intro class and around swarm season. The club also added a regional group, "Northeast WI Beekeeper," which now serves over 1,200 members. The motto is "Beekeepers Helping Beekeepers," where members ask questions and share photos or videos to get quick access to experienced regional beekeepers between meetings.



Ally Spottwood and Wayne Steigelman do a "No Mow May" TV spot.



Chris Groth and Carl Fisher set up for the Green Bay Botanical Gardens Fall Festival.

### BEYOND THE HIVE — COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Public interest in pollinators is booming and we're seizing the moment. Our Education Outreach Chairs coordinate school visits, library talks, pollinator camps and even TV segments. We highlight beekeeping, the role of native bees and pollinator-friendly gardening, not just honey bees.

Developing partnerships have opened doors. We work closely with the Green Bay Botanical Gardens and Northeast Wisconsin Technical College. These relationships have led to class and meeting spaces and co-managed apiaries to mention a few. The key: Say yes when the community knocks and good things can happen.

### CAMARADERIE AND COMMUNICATION

A club is only as strong as its community. Alongside education, we prioritize connection:

- Pre-meeting social hour
- Summer picnic and end-of-year party
- Honey, wax, and crafts contests (with bragging rights!)
- Beekeeper of the Year and New Beekeeper awards
- Group chats and newsletter shout-outs

Our communications strategy takes advantage of texts, emails, Facebook, newsletters, and video clips to get out the word. We want members to feel informed, involved, and inspired, whether they show up in person or engage from afar.

### PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

One of the best things we've done for the club's longevity is identify and grow future leaders. That means encouraging members to present, volunteer, and take on small leadership roles. Succession planning isn't a one-time task, it's an ongoing responsibility.

We also make space for new voices and fresh ideas. Our leadership listens. We regularly survey our members and have informal chats before and after meetings. Some of our best ideas start as casual conversations.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

At the end of the day, a successful bee club mirrors a successful hive. Everyone has a role. Communication flows. The environment is nurturing, yet productive. And there's always room for growth.

We're proud of what the Brown County Beekeepers have built and we're even more excited about what's next. If we stay curious, connected, and committed to serving both our members and our community, we believe the future will be bright.

**Dave** has been in beekeeping for 10 years. In his second year he co-coordinated the Brown County Beekeepers' Introduction to Beekeeping class. He was the President of the club from 2019-2023. During his tenure the club improved its education offerings, increased membership and created a Leadership Team that exists today. Dave is currently the club's Member Education Co-Chair. He is proud of his transition from the bees managing him to managing the bees — still a work in progress! What he enjoys most is learning and sharing honey bee knowledge with others.