

Herman Miller GreenHouse Finds a Honey of a Way to Handle Insect Nuisance

A Honey of a Tale

In the spring of 2000, the staff of the Herman Miller GreenHouse manufacturing facility in Holland, Michigan, realized they had a serious insect problem.

Large colonies of paper wasps had decided that the GreenHouse, with its ample welcoming windowsills and rain-sheltering eaves, was a great place to take up residence. Unfortunately, wasps can be aggressively territorial, as GreenHouse employees and visitors soon learned.

“They started getting into our air conditioning equipment, and some even found their way into the building,” says Dave Mallehan, Herman Miller GreenHouse safety and environmental compliance manager, “and since we follow a strict ‘no pesticides’ policy, we knew we had a tricky situation.”

How to handle a pack of bullying insects? Get bigger bullies. But first, a slight digression. While the wasps were wreaking havoc around the building, the wild flower terrain surrounding the GreenHouse was not living up to its colorful expectations. “I talked with several experts in the area, and they suggested we might have a pollination problem,” says Dave Kiekintveld, GreenHouse facility maintenance manager at the GreenHouse site. Further investigation led him to a beekeeper, and a plan was devised to bring beehives to the GreenHouse grounds.

“I was concerned that the wasps might harm the bees, or chase them away,” Kiekintveld explains, “but the beekeeper said that in fact the bees would take over the main food source and the wasps would be the ones to leave.”

In late June, the beekeeper brought 12 hives inhabited by approximately 600,000 honeybees to the natural areas around the GreenHouse. Sure enough, within a month most of the wasps had vacated the property.

While chasing off the unwelcome insects, the GreenHouse bees also went about their business of cross-pollinating the GreenHouse’s natural gardens. By the end of summer their efforts had spurred the growth of countless healthy and colorful wild flowers.

As a by-product of these endeavors the bees also started making honey and lots of it.

“Last year we bottled 9,000 4-ounce jars of honey,” Mallehan says. Kiekintveld calculates that this year’s output should more than double the 2,400 pounds of honey the bees produced last year, since the hives will be on the GreenHouse property from mid-April through the summer. The beehives spent the winter months in Georgia.

To put the honeybees’ prolific output into perspective, Kiekintveld explains that a typical honeybee will produce 1/12th of a teaspoon of honey during its six-week lifespan; on average, a bee colony will travel more than 55,000 miles and visit 2,000,000 flowers to make a pound of honey.

In addition to their hard work pollinating the GreenHouse grounds and producing delicious honey, the bees earned even more respect for leaving nearby humans alone. "Honeybees are known to be more docile around people, and we keep the hives well away from the buildings and foot paths," Mallehan explains. The GreenHouse area feature more than two miles of trails.

Bob Hieftje, director of Customer Experience at Herman Miller, stresses that the GreenHouse honeybee story represents more than an amusing little anecdote. "This is really another example of how we are living our values," he says. "We're not just talking up our environmental commitment – we're putting it into action and sharing it with our customers, every day."

Customers are confused at first, but after they learn the whole story behind the bees, they are impressed.

"Many people think, 'What does honey have to do with furniture?' But when you explain it, customers say, 'Wow, that's really neat. It makes sense,'" Heiftje said. "It really has an impact. It ties in with what this facility is all about."

Customer Guy Knowles of Rogers Communications in Toronto was on a tour of the Greenhouse and learned about the company's environmental programs and how the bees fit with its strategy. He thought it spoke volumes not only about the company's environmental policy but of its inventiveness as well.

"For the customer, the bees are basically a litmus test of creativity. Instead of just flying in here and spraying everything with DDT, they looked for another solution," Knowles said.

Environmentally friendly solutions are what the facility is all about. The building's glass saves energy by bringing in natural light, and the company has made efforts to preserve wetlands around the facility. It even filters the rainwater runoff from the parking lot to remove oil and other chemicals and debris before returning it to the ground.

This building and this site make a pretty strong environmental statement. Using the bees instead of chemicals fit with the environmental theme of this building.

Herman Miller for years has been recognized for its environmental efforts. The efforts at the Greenhouse show good environmental policy, which helped capture the national environmental awards in 1996.

When asked to weigh the results of the wasp-eradication and landscape-beautification efforts, Mallehan proudly extends an invitation to all interested. "The best way to judge our success is to pay a wasp-free visit the GreenHouse grounds starting in the late spring to see all the gorgeous wild flowers our bees have helped produced."

And while Herman Miller has no immediate plans to add West Michigan honey to its product line, Mallehan says that guests shouldn't forget to ask for a jar of GreenHouse Honey as a memento of their visit.

Footnotes:

- The main reason for getting the bees on site was because some of the indigenous flowers were not propagating as well as we anticipated and having the bees come in to help pollinate was the first (and lowest cost) idea on my list.
- The flowers not propagating and the paper wasp problems were both slowing growing not invasions.
- Paper wasps are more aggressive than honeybees especially around their homes which were being built under canopies and on the building. (The honeybee hives location we could control away from the building.)
- The building was never infested with paper wasp. Some did get into the building at times and some of the HVAC equipment did have nest built on them on the outside side of the filters.
- Bringing a large number of honeybees (whose home location we could control) to compete with the paper wasp for the food supply greatly decreased the numbers of paper wasps the area could sustain.
- We adjust the number of hives on site by the food sources available to them - starting with about 6 hives and going up to 24 hives last year during the peak flowering season.
- The Greenhouse site honeybees produce more than 5000 lbs. of honey per year.
- In 2005 we distributed 5745 4oz. bottles on honey (1436 1/4 lbs.).
- We also collect the beeswax and create a limited number of beeswax candles for gifts.