

# The Bee Tree

By Mark Collins

Every pre-climb tree inspection checklist includes looking into the canopy for bees. A discussion usually follows about what to do about this rare occasion, as if someone in the group would actually know what to do. In 20 years of tree work in Atlanta, I've only run into bees, honey bees, in trees twice, the first in a pruning job where the hive was easily avoided; the second time, last week, in a removal. The bees were in a hollow about 25 feet up a cherry tree and I could see them massed outside to keep cool in the hot, humid weather. I had to do some research about this situation.

Being a conservationist who tries to find a use for everything, I immediately thought I would find a beekeeper to take the bees off my hands. I called an old friend whom I had not spoken to in a year or so and left a message asking if he still had bees and was interested in this hive. The County Extension office gave me the names of several beekeeping groups and individuals I could call. My first contact assured me that a garden sprayer with soapy water would kill the bees and I would not have anything to worry about. He explained that it just was not worth the time to save the bees, that you could buy them from a supplier for less than \$100. The second contact told me something similar but said he was interested if I would get them down then call him. And I was thinking I would find eager beekeepers enthusiastic for some free bees ...

By this time I was thinking of Plan C when my old buddy called. After a few questions, he said he would love to have some wild bees to go with his domestic hives. He said he would drive to the site with me to check it out. Great! I could get some tips, borrow his veil and smoker and get the bees and the tree down with a crane. Only one thing – he was working out of town and could not be there, so he gave me some instructions:

1. Wear the netting over the face, tape the pants legs and wear long sleeves so the bees would not fly in and sting. Use cloth gloves, as leather signals invading animals.



2. Go early in the morning while the bees are inactive and cover the hole with screen and duct tape.

3. Obviously, be calm and do not wave your arms like an idiot as that will rile them.

He gave me more extremely interesting information that I would forget in five minutes, but I felt confident I could do the job.

The day of the job we went early, before the sun was fully up. The bees were passively resting on the outside of the hollow. I suited up, wearing a thick sweatshirt on a day when the high would be in the 90s, and taped up. At least I would sweat out all the toxins in my body and could replenish them later. The rest of my crew passed on the opportunity.

On the sage advice of those on the ground, I got the smoker ready, got a lift on the crane (following ANSI standards of course) and carefully inspected. I then began to puff smoke at them. The smoke is supposed to make them think there is a forest fire, at which time they go inside and gorge themselves on honey, bulking up in preparation for moving to another area. Instead, many of them flew away. Nevertheless, I calmly, though clumsily, taped the screen over the hole.

The bees did not really care about me; they seemed as docile as cows. They continued their hive work so I proceeded to remove the dead 75-foot-tall cherry tree. It was actually a fairly simple operation. I cut everything

down to just above the hollow while the ground man played with the smoker, making the place smoky as a campground. As the last piece was being lifted away, I started seeing bees escape from a hole in the top. Uh oh, can't let them get away. I covered the hole with my cloth-gloved hand. By this time, the chipper had been going for awhile and the crane operator had his hands full. As I stood on spikes, motionless, my hand over this hole, I yelled "Duct tape!" 100 times before anyone could figure me out. It seemed like it was 15 minutes; I think they thought I was asking for "lemonade." By the time I got the tape, one of the bees inside realized there was a live hand inside the glove. When you get stung, you also get tagged and the other bees then know where the target is. If you and I were standing together and you got stung and ran away, I could stand still and watch the bees chase and sting you because you are tagged, you are "it." The tagging is supposed to last just a few minutes, then you are clean again. Anyway, my hand was stung through the glove. Not in the mood to be "it," I decided to take a break. I took off the glove, stuffed it in the hole and jumped onto the rope to the ground. Thank God for friction savers.

I had finally managed to make them angry, so we all took a break. After a while, I went back up, fully covered, and cut the section that contained the hive. The crane operator lowered the whole section into the back of the crane truck and I came down. I delivered it 2½ miles to its new home, glove still plugging up the hole. Once the hive was on the ground, I cut a small hole in the screen as instructed, to let out one or two bees so they could check out the new site and tell the others. We returned to the job site but the remaining bees were so upset they went after the crane and everything around it so we finished the job the following week. The bees are now happily making honey, which I look forward to tasting. Maybe I'll even get my glove back.

*Author's Note: No bees were intentionally killed to make this story, and as my friend says, bee colonies are like trees. They can lose a few bees or leaves, but the organism carries on.*

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