

Dec. 7, 2005

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UGA honey adds sweetness to holidays

**By Stephanie Schupska
University of Georgia**

It may not come in cute little Dawg-shaped bottles, but University of Georgia honey still sells like “wild cakes.”

“It has been selling like wild cakes, no, hot cakes and wildfire,” said Jennifer Berry, a University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences research coordinator. “We sent out the Christmas honey announcement, and we’ll probably sell out of it by Dec. 19.”

Berry’s face lights up as she talks about honey and honey bees at her office at UGA’s bee laboratory. Three years ago, the lab needed funding for student and seasonal workers. Then it clicked. They could sell their surplus honey.

UGA’s honey bees produce up to 200 pounds of honey a year, Berry said. Bee colonies only need about 60 pounds for food.

Even with some initial doubts, the honey sold well the first year. In 2004, with between 25 and 30 colonies set aside for honey production, the UGA program sold 4,000 pounds of honey.

This year, when CAES research professional Detsy Bridges sent out an e-mail in the late fall saying the entomology department had honey for sale, the response was immediate.

“The first day we sent the e-mail out, I had five calls in five minutes,” said Bridges.

Labeled as UGA Honey Bee Farm

Pure Natural Honey, the honey is a little more expensive than the average grocery store variety. Besides the production costs, the honey is pure, meaning that it comes from a particular source of nectar, Berry said.

Supermarket honey is often a random blend of honeys from several different countries. The end product, which Berry and her colleagues call “mutt honey,” is a mixture of whichever honey manufacturers receive at the time.

It’s like comparing a really good beer, like Guinness, to Schlitz, or a fine, well-made wine to a lesser brand, she said.

“When you’re harvesting a particular plant, there’s a lot of time, a lot of work that’s involved,” she said. “People who have bought our honey are coming back because they love the way it tastes.”

In Oconee County, Ga., where the UGA Honey Bee Laboratory is located, blackberry, blueberry and bramble blooms give the honey its pale color and flowery, fruity flavor.

“It doesn’t have a real strong aftertaste,” Berry said. “It has a real smooth flavor to it.”

In January, cotton bloom honey will be for sale. The honey bee program also sells sourwood honey.

Prices for the UGA honey are similar to local market prices. But, Berry says the program strives not to compete with local producers. The honey is sold primarily on the UGA campus and at Athens, Ga., restaurant Farm 255.

A quart is \$8; pint, \$5; 16 ounces,

\$4; and a honey bear is \$3.50. They also package special-order sizes for weddings and other special occasions.

Being a UGA product, Berry considered having a Dawg-shaped container instead of the traditional honey bear dispenser. The honey bear won out when Berry discovered the dog-shaped mold would cost \$30,000.

Although honey is a \$75 million industry in Georgia, it often goes unnoticed.

“Politicians don’t have a clue that we exist,” Berry said.

It’s not just the honey the industry produces that makes it important. Farmers need bees to pollinate their crops.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Varroa mite almost destroyed the wild bee population in Georgia. Beekeepers were able to treat their honeybees for the mites, but the wild bees didn’t have this protection. Now, farmers in the lower part of the state often rent honey bees for pollination.

Berry keeps the latest buzz about honey bee production in politicians’ ears by sending UGA honey to state officials. “This helps them understand the importance of honey bees,” she said, “not just to our economy, but also to our ecology.”

For information on buying UGA Honey Bee Farm Pure Natural Honey, contact Detsy Bridges at (706) 542-9035 by Dec. 16.

(Stephanie Schupska is a news editor with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.)