

MIDTOWN GOLD

STORY AND PHOTO BY JENNIFER CHANDLER

Have you ever driven down Central and heard the hum of bees? If so, you were probably passing in front of Dr. Webster Rigg's Midtown home. Smack dab in the heart of the city, Webster is harvesting his own great honey. This liquid gold comes from the four hives that adorn Webster's front yard.

How did a Pediatric Radiologist and Clinical Professor of Radiology become a beekeeper? "I was making some noises about wanting to be a beekeeper," Webster reminisces, "Then my son Rollin gave me a hive for a birthday present and I became an obligatory beekeeper." That was 30 years ago and he has added three more hives to his collection. Webster has definitely embraced this obligation.

As one would expect of any academic, Webster has spent much time researching his hobby. As he shows me his collection of decades-old copies of the *American Bee Journal* and his compilation of slides and videos, Webster explains that bee keeping is not a difficult hobby to pick up.

"Bee keeping really doesn't take that much time compared to other hobbies," explains Webster, "I usually have one harvest per year and I only go out to check on the hives a few times during the winter. Even during the peak season, I only spend about an hour per week."

The peak season for honey production in the mid-South is from the first of March, when dandelions, lawn clover, wisteria and privet hedge first start to bloom, through the end of June. "Come July, August and September we have very little in bloom because of the heat," Webster explains, "We do get a little more activity in the Fall when asters bloom."

And where do the 20,000 or so bees that live in each hive come from? Why the United States Postal Service of course! There are several mail-order companies who sell both queens and worker bees to replace those colonies that don't make it through the winter months. "My dad knows they are here when he sees the mailman coming to

the door with a terrified look on his face," jokes Webster's son Rollin, "A box full of thousands of bees makes an ominous buzzing sound."

"I laugh at some of the questions I get. It seems that half the U.S. population didn't pay attention in their third grade science class," jests Webster. When asked 'How does he train the bees to stay in his yard?,' he jokingly explains that he has a hard time remembering names of all 80,000 bees. "I keep count of my bees by first counting all their legs and then dividing by six" is another one-liner he offers with a chuckle. Moving to a more serious tone, Webster explains that he is a bee "keeper" not "trainer." His bees roam a radius of several miles to collect the nectar to make their honey. The pheromone from the queen is what leads the worker bees back to their home.

Webster's annual harvest is in the Fall when all the honey making activity is done for the season. Most years, he is able to yield about 75 pounds of golden delicious honey from his hives. If you know him, you are probably one of the lucky few to receive one of his one-pound bottles of liquid gold as a gift. (Webster does not sell his honey.) So if anyone ever hands you a bottle labeled "Riggs Honey: 100% Pure Since 1980," be sure to savor every drop of this rare locally-produced commodity. *eM*

Dr. Webster Rigg's Recommended Resources for Beekeeping:

Dadant & Sons, Inc. (www.dadant.com)

American Bee Journal

Memphis Area Beekeepers Association
(www.memphisareabeekeepers.org)

Once a restaurateur, Jennifer Chandler is now a contributing food writer to several magazines both locally and nationwide. She is a food stylist and the author of *Simply Salads*.



Memphis Area Beekeepers Association meetings are held on the second Monday of each month, 7:00 PM at the Agricenter. The meetings are open to all and are a fantastic way to learn about apiculture and meet beekeepers in the area. For more information go to www.memphisareabeekeepers.org.