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Honey - ancient, golden wonder

Sashi Kiran

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HONEY is the world's oldest natural unprocessed sweetener. It's a power bank of health benefits and a key to health and wealth. If you're not taking full advantage of the nutritional and medicinal properties of honey, it's time to begin because honey is a remarkable healing agent for all sorts of ailments.

A quick search on its health benefits shows it contains flavonoids, antioxidants which help reduce the risk of some cancers and heart disease as well as reduce ulcers and other gastrointestinal disorders. Honey is known for its anti-bacterial, anti-fungal properties for healing since ancient times. The Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians documented the healing properties of honey as early as Aristotle's mention of it in 384 BC. Even King Solomon said in the Bible: "My son, eat thou honey, for it is good."

Even doctors apply honey on wounds to speed up healing and diabetics use honey as their sugar replacement.

Honey can be a steady source of wealth as well. Just ask Seseieli Siki who set up her bee farm in 2013 in Sigatoka and has been steadily earning income from honey. For double benefits, Siki has set up a fruit orchard around her boxes and reaps the benefit with consistent fruiting because of pollination.

Siki, is part of 200 men and women FRIEND farmers spread around Macuata, Tavueni, Ra, Tavua, Ba, Lautoka and Nadroga.

Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development (FRIEND,) a livelihood NGO headquartered in Lautoka has trained these 200 farmers around Fiji and has assisted in setting up their apiary farms over the years with assistance from donors, including the European Union.

The project was so financial rewarding that when schools and cooperatives requested for income generation options beekeeping was a favourite. Thirty-two primary schools have beekeeping as their income source with assistance from Access to Quality Education Program and five preschools set up their bee farms as well.

All these farms have been operational now for more than three years and the most recent set-up and assisted by OXFAM has benefited five co-operatives in Ra. For all these to succeed, a farmer has to enjoy beekeeping and develop a relationship with the busy bees!

Bee experts assert that to make one pound of honey, it takes approximately 60,000 bees travelling to possibly two million flowers (around 55,000 miles) to extract enough nectar. That's a lot of teamwork and it takes a lot of time!

Bees are most disciplined, have great delegation system with very specialised roles and require very little care. However farmers have to keep checking the boxes so diseases and insects don't invade the boxes.

Through experiments, we have discovered bees produce the maximum amount of honey when boxes are in shady areas so bees don't have to spend time cooling the boxes and can focus on collection of pollen. We insist our farmers plant flowering plants around the boxes and have a water source to make it easy for bees to find their basic needs and for apiary farms to be successful.

When I told Melaia Salacakau, our apiary trainer, how bees absolutely fascinate me, she laughingly noted that bees are so disciplined that when harvest team members sometimes forget to place the wax lined frames back, bees line up themselves exactly as they would in a frame and develop their own wax lining!

Beehives are set in double boxes, the box below has honey for their food and we harvest the top box. From our farm we have been able to harvest every month, and even during this drought we have strong hives.

We do not feed sugar to our bees nor do we recommend it to our farmers. The site for placement of boxes is crucial for its survival and growth.

Walking around FRIEND farms, we realise that bees seem to love basil flowers. Our bee farm is surrounded by basil and fruit trees and sure enough, we have all year round flowering of fruit trees near the bee farm.

Different pollens give texture, colour and taste to honey and basil honey is one of the best I have tasted!

Bees have evolved a very advanced system to protect their homes. They line their boxes with protective propolis, a black substance that keeps insects away. This propolis is extracted and used extensively for medicinal purposes.

Many of the farmers just pop small pieces in their mouth for different ailments. We extract the propolis and team members with a fever and a cough get their doses to boost their immune system! Of course this is in addition to the signature herbal teas that are prepared as daily immune boosters.

Each harvest, we also see enough wax to be made into creative art pieces. Some wax is melted and developed into wax sheets to be fitted on their frames for their next round of honey production.

Propolis and wax are additional products for health and wealth. Honey is the wonder product that every household feels lucky to have.

This sweet golden, viscous wonder makes anyone crave it on toasts and cereals. I use honey as a replacement for eggs in my baking and it is a great baste for baking various meat dishes giving it golden look and taste.

Honey is a great cough remedy and we have discovered that a tiny drop on the tongue of toddlers with congestion and throat infections help them cough out all the mucous.

Honey, if harvested at the right time, has no expiry date. Our honey is unheated, untreated and sold as raw product in glass jars, highly recommended for storage of honey to retain its goodness.

Some plastic containers allow the honey to lose water content or can leech chemicals into your honey. Make sure crumbs and foreign debris are not allowed to remain in the honey as you put it away. These foreign objects allow for bacteria and mold to grow that could not do so without their presence.

Plain honey, lemon juice in hot water starts my day and as a regular traveller who is exposed to stresses of changing environment, I carry a jar of honey mixed with grounded pepper and ginger as my medicine kit!

Bees bring a buzz to gardens and honey brings natural goodness and taste of millions of flowers to our table. This wonder product is available at your supermarkets distributed through our partner Motibhai & Company Ltd.



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