Sharon and John Gibbons are busy, busy, busy with the Gibbons Bee Farm in Ballwin, MO. Honey is the principal enterprise on their farm, but their bees also help pollinate orchard and field crops across much of eastern Missouri. Both Sharon and John hold off-farm jobs in the St. Louis area—Sharon as a dental hygienist and John as a freelance executive recruiter.

The Gibbonses did not exactly fly into the beekeeping business without giving it a lot of thought. They began by purchasing a small farm in Crawford County, on the northeastern rim of the Missouri Ozarks, where they planned to make their home after retirement.

To provide an income supplement later on, they planted trees on the land. But trees are a slow-paying proposition. “We wanted to begin an enterprise that would start yielding income quicker,” recalls Sharon.
In addition to her beekeeping activities Gibbons maintains an observation hive in the Florrisont School District's nature center.

The ancient art of tending honeybees, perhaps? Sharon read up on the subject and enrolled in a beekeeping workshop. Still, she was not convinced that bees and honey would mesh with her spare time and temperament.

"John fairly well decided the question one evening, when he came home with two colonies of bees and all the equipment we needed to get started," Sharon remembers. "We were in the bee business."

How Sweet It Is

The Gibbonses concentrated on producing quality honey that could be sold directly to consumers. Sharon sold honey from those first few colonies of bees through gift shops and specialty stores. As her expertise grew, so did the scale of the honey hobby.

Today, Gibbons Bee Farm has about 100 colonies, producing more than 4 tons of the natural liquid sweetener each year. All that honey is extracted and packed at the Gibbons home, and virtually all of it sells at retail.

Depending on what species of plants happen to be in bloom, the Gibbons' bees may range over a 50-mile radius, from the Mississippi River north of St. Louis to Augusta, well up the Missouri River.

"The most hives we put in any one location is 20," says Sharon. "Bees work an area within about 2 miles of the hive. If they must fly much farther than that, they waste too much time and energy. As a result, we spend a lot of time moving the bees to where the blossoms are."

The Gibbonses have learned to specialize by producing different types of honey. Early in the year, they place hives where the winged couriers can collect nectar from clovers, honeysuckle, black locust, and fruit tree blossoms. In late summer, the bees harvest asters, goldenrod, and other fall-blooming plants. Sharon processes and packages the two types of honey separately.

"Clover and fruit-tree honey is light-colored, delicately flavored, and ideal for table use," she explains. "The honey made later in the season—we call it Ozark Wildflower—is darker and stronger flavored and gives a more distinct honey flavor in cooking and baking."

The Gibbonses stress quality. The ribbons, plaques, and medals on their wall are testimony to how well they have succeeded. Gibbons Bee Farm honey has garnered awards at national competitions sponsored by the American Beekeepers Association, and it was picked as grand champion of the 1988 Missouri State Fair. A year later, Gibbons honey won blue ribbons in 10 of a possible 15 honey categories at the State Fair.
Processed Honey Products

Sharon has developed a variety of honey-based products to please the palates of her customers. She whips or spins honey and blends in pieces of fruit—apricot, peach, raspberry, apple, strawberry—to make a unique spread for toast, muffins, and other breads. Gibbons Honey Crunch is a light, honey-coated popcorn, packaged as a ready-to-eat snack.

"We have tried to come up with as many different honey-based products as we can adequately manage and market," says Sharon. "We also pack wooden crates and baskets with a variety of honeys and honey-related products to market to people as gifts for friends and relatives."

Most Gibbons Bee Farm honey still sells through gift shops, specialty food stores, and other retail outlets. In recent years, Sharon has also developed a direct-mail clientele, with a growing list of repeat buyers.

The direct-mail effort got a boost when Gibbons Bee Farm honey and other products were selected for the Best of Missouri Farms catalog, published by the University of Missouri-Columbia and University Extension. Products featured in the catalog are judged by the University's Food Science Department, and some 10,000 copies of the publication are distributed nationwide.

"The Best of Missouri Farms catalog put me in touch with buyers I would never have contacted otherwise," says Sharon. "We are selling honey to customers virtually from coast to coast."

Sharon admits to being concerned—not worried—about the effect that aggressive Africanized bees, which have been migrating north in recent years, may have on their enterprise.

"I've read that Africanized bees from South America are coming into the United States within the next year or so," she says. "I hope scientists will solve the problem. If not, I'll simply have to learn how to handle them."

The only other problem (if it is a problem) with the Gibbons' beekeeping hobby is that it has grown into a full-time enterprise before Sharon and John are quite ready to retire. "When we do retire," says Sharon, "we shouldn't be spending a lot of time in rocking chairs."