



Leader Bee

LEADING YOUNG PEOPLE **BY EXAMPLE**

By Christy Hudson, Communications Coordinator

Most people don't think bees and students are a good mix, but Austin Mattox, a senior at Fort White High School, has changed a lot of minds.



Austin Mattox encourages students to become beekeepers.

"Austin has had the proficiency going for years," said Wayne Oelfke, agriscience teacher and FFA advisor at Fort White High School. "He has infected, I don't know how many of the kids here, with enthusiasm. I wouldn't call them all master beekeepers yet, but they certainly know much more than I ever will because of Austin."

"When I came into the FFA program they weren't really doing anything with bees," said Mattox. "So I basically brought it back to life and it was a lot of due diligence on our part to get the approval

since bees are a very touchy subject because of allergies."

Mattox said students had learned about bees, but there were never any bees at the school's land lab until this year.

"They taught a little bit about bees, but not in depth like we're going in now," said Mattox.

Mattox grew up around bees through involvement in the family bee business from a young age. His family produces cattle, hay and queen bees in addition to honey and pollination services through Mattox Farms.

"I think at the beginning, he just absorbed it like a sponge, and now it's more of a passion," said Dallas Mattox, Austin's father. "He's all about agriculture and bees."

"The idea I had when I got into [Oelfke's] class was for a bee co-op," Austin said. "The idea was to have a shared honey house, with an extractor and all the equipment you need to harvest the honey, but the main thing is it needs to be certified by the Florida Department of Health because honey is a food product, so you have to make it safe."

Mattox said this co-op would allow beekeepers, students and teachers to use the honey house and share expenses. "By having it here at the school, all of us would

have access to the equipment we need and share the cost," Mattox explained.

Mattox said his main goal is to include as many people in the co-op as possible so more people are encouraged to become backyard beekeepers. Mattox says this will lead to more bees in the environment and with more bees pollinating more plants, it will be good for the whole community.

"The honey house would be up at the school by the green house," said Mattox. "It doesn't have to be a real big area, it just needs to be food grade because it has to be approved by the health department."

"We're trying to grow the idea and we're at the foundation of it right now," said Mattox.

"I look at Austin and those he is working with as giving example of the vision of the farmer of the future," said Oelfke. "The diversity, looking at things as opportunities, putting that effort in, the passion for it and just making it happen."

Oelfke said his classes are project-oriented with a structure for students to learn, apply and teach.

"It's when they learn it and apply it and then in turn serve that back to the community, that you see a real growth in them," said Oelfke. "Because there's nothing better than

