

# SUCCESS STORY

## Scandia Honey

In the small community of Scandia, Alta., a business with 600 million immigrant employees is enjoying sweet success.

Although only 20 of the workers are human and the rest are prone to stinging their employers, Scandia Honey, owned by Reece and Echo Chandler, is the largest beekeeping operation in Canada, a hive of activity from spring to fall.

It's a business, like the agriculture sector it services, that thrives during the warm months and lies dormant during the cold. The Chandlers make their hay while the sun shines.

Scandia Honey has operated since 1937. Reece and Echo, small-business owners from Calgary, purchased it in 1996, moving to the hamlet amid a New Year's Day freeze and spending that first year learning the business from their experienced employees, some of whom are still with the firm. (Six work year-round, while 14 are required during the busy season when the other 559 million-plus workers are doing their thing pollinating canola and producing honey and wax.)

Learning their A-Bee-Cees: Jose Perez, Charlie Rosario, and his brother Christopher Rosario keep their "workers" productive.



The learning curve was painful; Reece was stung so often in the first month, the stings now go virtually unnoticed.

Scandia Honey is actually five businesses in one. The Chandlers and their crew, aided by their two teenage children in summer, are beekeepers first, ensuring the health of the insects they depend on for the other four components, the largest of which is canola pollination.

Scandia helps Bayer Crop Science and Pioneer Hybrid produce parent canola seeds that are bagged and sold to farmers for canola production. Scandia Honey is paid to ensure its bees touch each flower in the rows of male and female canola plants. Each field is over-saturated with about 300 hives to ensure the bees do their thing.

Due to over-saturation, there isn't much honey produced per hive. But Scandia Honey doesn't rely on the bees to produce honey during the crop season.

"We have a perfect pocket in Scandia," says Reece "Hot desert-like weather, availability of water through irrigation and isolation of crops to avoid cross-pollination make it a unique and perfect area for canola pollination."

When the Chandlers bought Scandia Honey, canola pollination was small potatoes. But Reece and Echo banked on the seed companies' predictions that the concept would grow. It's now a major component of their business, taking its success from its location and area characteristics.

The second-largest component is bee importing. Harsh winters increase bee mortality and replacements are required. Canadian beekeepers used to purchase the critters from the United States, but bee disease closed that source some 25 years ago. Scandia Honey brings them in from New Zealand, a world leader in bee production (335,000 hives in an area two-thirds the size of Alberta).

Packed 10,000 to a cubic-foot box, the bees are rushed to Canada where Scandia, the

country's largest bee seller, ensures they reach destinations across the country. Last year, the Chandlers imported 14,000 boxes (that's 140 million bees).

If you're wondering about the business's sweet spot, it's only third in order of importance. Bees make honey for a small number of days, so while the quality is good, quantity isn't as high as it is in, say, the Peace River area, where longer summer days give bees a production advantage.

Then there's wax rendering. In the winter, Scandia Honey extracts wax from the honeycombs and ships it through a wax broker to New York for use in cosmetics. How much wax? About 40,000 pounds – 20 tons – annually.

Beekeeping, it seems, attracts a United Nations of qualified practitioners. Scandia's seasonal employees (full-time workers are Canadian) hail from Mexico, the Philippines, Thailand, New Zealand, South Africa and Russia. In fact, Scandia Honey was nominated for the Brooks Chamber of Commerce Diversity Award in 2010.

Three Mexican workers have proven to be loyal employees during the years, with some 38 years of service between them. This retention of steady staff is critical to Scandia's success.

So, too, is the relationship the Chandlers enjoy with their neighbours and the sweet deal they have with area farmers. Scandia Honey relies on farmers' fields for their bees to find pollen, and pays them in honey. Reece and Echo developed a symbiotic relationship with surrounding farmers; both have found the recipe for prosperity, with bees as the common ingredient.

So, after 14 years of stings and successes, Reece and Echo know they'll be staying put the rest of their lives amid their winged workforce.

"We truly love being out here in Scandia," says Reece.