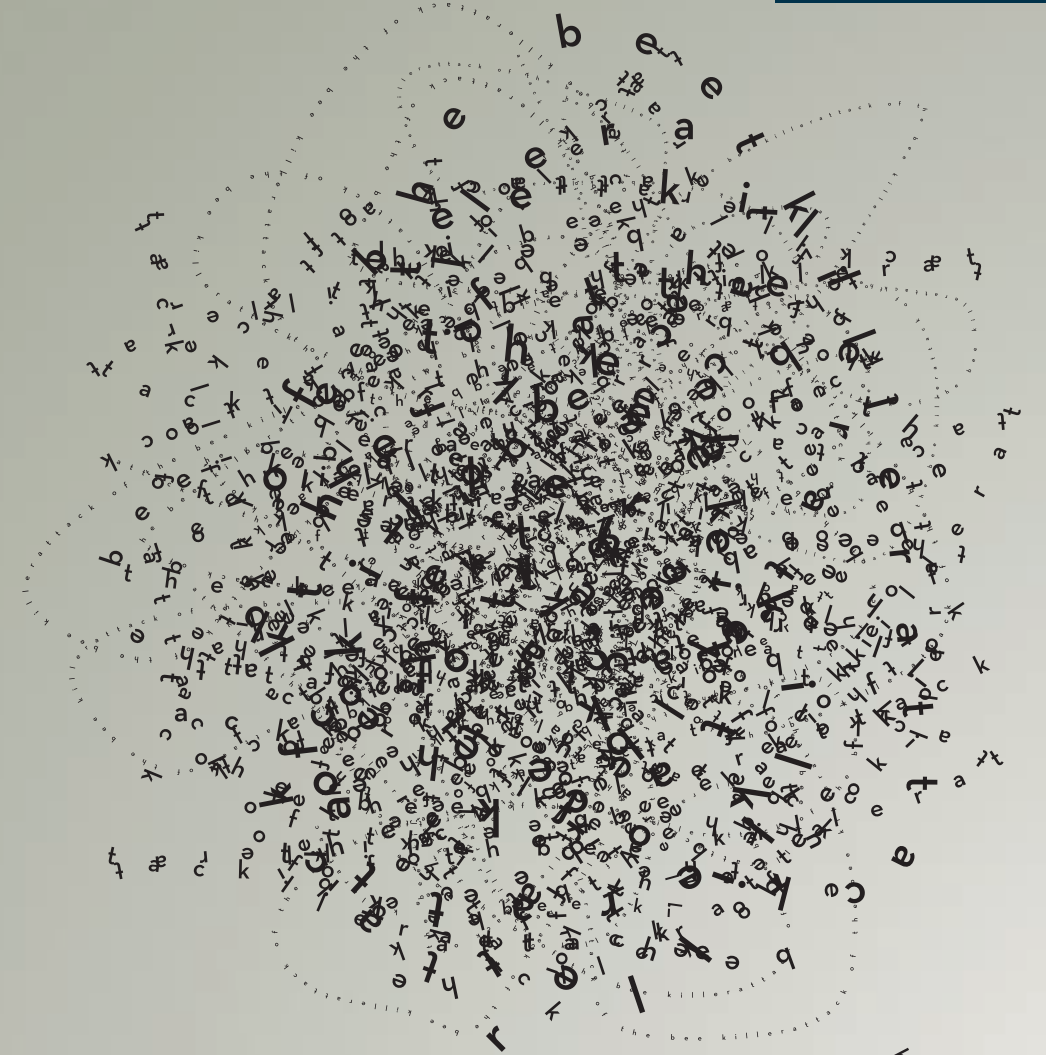




a t t a c k o f t h e b e e



ABLE TO WITHSTAND 250 BEE STINGS IN A SINGLE DAY, KENT GRIFFITH IS THE MAN TO CALL WHEN YOU HAVE A BUSY BEE IN YOUR BONNET.

K i l l e
Melissa Crytzer
Fry Photography by Brandon Sullivan

Kent Griffith has been known to pop a bee or two into his mouth, crunching away while his customers watch with dropped-jaw fascination.

This, of course, is after the Africanized bee removal expert voluntarily stings himself to show customers how the impaled stinger pulses back and forth on his skin, pumping venom into his blood.

“I do it to humanize bees to people—and to be entertaining,” Griffith says. “People don’t need to live in fear of bees. They watch me and see, ‘He’s having a snack. He was stung by a bee.’ Suddenly it becomes, ‘Killer bee, schmiller bee.’”

But don’t be fooled by his aw-shucks attitude. The 43-year-old Tucson resident is a world-class expert on Africanized bees who wears the 250 bee stings he can get on a typical summer day like medals of honor. Griffith spends his workday dangling from Southern Arizona’s sheer rock faces, crawling under boulders, wedging himself between precipices, and traversing mesquite and Palo Verde-filled desert washes as he searches for Africanized bee colonies.

“I’m fairly unique in that nobody in Arizona offers the sort of work that I do,” he says. He specializes in large areas and monitors bee activity for Tucson-based housing development companies, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, corporations, and the University of Arizona.

For Saguaro Ranch, an ecologically friendly resort community in the Tortolita Mountains, Griffith provides monthly monitoring, literally checking every inch of its more than 1,000-acre site. His job is to rid the area—including the equestrian center and bridle and hiking trails—of nest sites.

This is no small feat considering Southern Arizona is one of the first areas in the United States the hybrids hit following a 1956 experiment in South America that aimed to increase honey bees’ productivity by cross-breeding European and African bees. Africanized bees crossed the border from Mexico into Arizona in 1993 via the Santa Cruz riverbed.

“Tucson is the epicenter of the Africanized bee population in the United States,” Griffith explains.

But he insists they have gotten a bad rap.

“These bees are not naturally aggressive,” he says, explaining that a person could stand in the midst of a reproductive swarm of Africanized bees while shaking a bush filled with nectar-foraging bees and never be stung. The only time they get defensive, Griffith says, is when they perceive a threat to their colony.

“A healthy respect for all venomous creatures is necessary in the desert,” Griffith says, adding that, when provoked, Africanized bees can be dangerous. Today, 99.9 percent of Arizona’s bees are Africanized, keeping Griffith busy nearly 80 hours a week during the summer months.

Armed with a backpack of sudsy water and what he calls “bee sense,” the ex-journeyman ice and rock climber often finds himself hiking 20 miles through the desert with a 40-foot ladder in tow or hanging precariously from desert mountains miles from anyone. His preferred attire is shorts, a T-shirt, and sneakers.

Even at the U of A, Griffith refuses to don the bee suit (although he always carries protective gear). “If you’re in a bee suit, you really don’t have a barometer as to what the bees are doing,” he says.

Sometimes bees send warning signals—such as simply bumping into their predators. But when they’re defending a nest site, they may sting and bite with their mandibles. If the bees are “extremely defensive” during an on-campus removal, for instance, Griffith says he’ll establish a larger perimeter around the hive using yellow tape.

This protects other people, but not Griffith himself. Fortunately for him, though, he has one of the highest immunities to bee stings ever documented. His skin rarely swells, and he has received as many as 1,000 stings from cliff-dwelling bees—without requiring a trip to the hospital.

From the time he was young, Griffith exhibited an uncanny comfort-level around bees, often sneaking into his beekeeping neighbor’s yard to watch the insects.

“For me, it was really exciting to watch the bees operate,” he says. He still feels the same today. Griffith has developed the

largest database of feral (domesticated bees gone wild) hive sites in the world. That, combined with 11 years of field experience through his bee-removal business, has garnered him the attention of some of the world’s leading researchers—and television programs.

Griffith spent 17 years as a building contractor who dabbled in bee removal, but more recently, he has become a regular on Discovery Communications programs. He served as a behind-the-scenes animal handler for *The Jeff Corwin Experience*, transporting three bee colonies to the shoot, placing them on the show’s host, and ensuring the safety of the crew.

He also will host bee and wasp segments in the *MegaBugs* series in early 2005, during which he voluntarily endures the most painful sting of all insects: the tarantula hawk.

Griffith’s wife of 21 years, Donna, and his 13- and 11-year-old sons, Drew and Ian, are accustomed to his daredevil ways. When he volunteers to be the subject of a live bee attack on film or spends 24-hour workdays in remote areas of the state—northern altitudes included—it’s business as usual.

“I couldn’t have strategized a better lifestyle,” says Griffith, also a cancer survivor. “When you’ve got 60 pounds of gear on your back and you’re headed up a mountain, covered in bee stings, ... it’s fun. It brings together all the things I love—the great outdoors, tremendous challenge, and the creative process.”



“A healthy respect for all venomous creatures is necessary in the desert.”



ALTHOUGH AFRICANIZED BEES ARE NOT AGGRESSIVE BY NATURE, OUT-OF-THE-ORDINARY EVENTS SUCH AS ABNORMAL MOVEMENT, ODORS, AND VIBRATIONS NEAR THEIR COLONIES CAN TRIGGER A DEFENSIVE RESPONSE. GRIFFITH OFFERS A FEW TIPS TO ADVENTURESOME OUTDOOR HIKERS AND EVEN CITY-SLICKERS WHO MIGHT COME IN CONTACT WITH THE INSECT KNOWN FOR ITS SWEET HONEY AND ITS SHARP STING.

WHEN HIKING:

Wear white clothing. Because bees' normal predators are dark-coated skunks and bears, anything darkly coated is more likely to elicit a defensive response when a colony feels threatened. Avoid wearing dark clothing, including the color red, which bees interpret as black.

IN YOUR BACK YARD:

If you see a constant exchange of bee activity, do not investigate. Call a professional for removal. Bees will take up residence anywhere—under sheds, in walls, in decorative pots—and the longer they are there, the more defensive they become.

ON THE ATTACK: If a bee stings you, immediately run downwind (if possible) of the colony and stay out of the bees' line of sight (they have between 9,000 and 14,000 eyelets on each side of their heads). If you are marked with a stinger, a defense alarm—triggered by pheromone release—will be sent to the colony. The longer you stay within the area, the greater their response will be.

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NOTE: Griffith's ability to work without a bee suit is a function of years of experience and should never be attempted by anyone, including other bee specialists.