

# Bees On Allotments

Ealing and District Bee Keepers Association

At the request of the L B Ealing, limited research has been undertaken into bees and allotments, with a view to agreeing situations where hives are able to be sited on allotment sites owned by the L B Ealing.

This research was undertaken by advertising in "BeeCraft" and responses from beekeepers in different parts of the country responding by telephone, E-mail and letter.

## **The benefits of Bee keeping ...**

There are a number of benefits of maintaining bees, and bee keeping is an ancient craft that, in itself, warrants encouragement. It makes an intriguing and fascinating hobby. In addition to producing valuable honey, there are other valuable products available from a beehive, including wax (promoting crafts such as candle making); propolis and pollen (both with medicinal effects claimed for them). Other crafts such as basket making are also encouraged by bee keeping.

Swarms are a natural occurrence, and swarms occur even when bees are kept by beekeepers feral colonies prosper and will swarm; beekeepers are often keen to collect swarms as they represent a fresh stock of bees, and the value of this swarm collection service to the community is considerable.

Agriculturally, bees provide a valuable pollination resource, and any crop which requires pollination (fruit and seed crops) will benefit from the presence of hives nearby. Better yields and better quality produce will result from good pollination. Farmers pay beekeepers to bring hives to crops for a pollination service for crops such as apple, and encourage hives to be brought to Oil Seed Rape so that the crop is well pollinated. Benefits will equally result if there are hives on allotment sites.

Sustainability: Agenda 21 provides for sustainable development, and some councils have recognised that there is benefit from local production of food; bees therefore have a place in Local Agenda 21 initiatives - both improving the quality of fruit and vegetable crops, and also in the production of food themselves.

Educationally: bees are social insects and, because of the way in which they can be managed in modern hives, their lifestyles can be easily studied. This gives them value in the classroom, and can encourage responsible attitudes to other creatures and the environment generally.

In an urban environment, bees can be very productive as they are able to forage from a wide range of plants in gardens, parks etc., over a wide "flowering" period. There is an added advantage also, in that they keep to their own natural cycle, largely unaffected by man - this independence, even in highly managed and controlled urban environment, can be quite inspirational to those who are sensitive to it.

In some areas there is a surfeit of allotment sites, which are untended and allowed to grow wild. If beekeepers are able to use plots as apiaries, then there will be an increase in the number of individuals wanting to rent sites and a reduction in vacant plots.

## **Disadvantages of Bee keeping:**

A colony of bees, at its peak in the summer, can contain about 50,000 bees; if there is a good source of nectar available to the bees, the speed and numbers of bees entering and leaving the hive is considerable, and this may cause concern to those close by.

During manipulations (i.e. opening the hive for examination of the bees, brood, etc., and any necessary changes that are to be made to the interior of the hive) a large number of bees may fly around the beekeeper, and act aggressively to defend their home and its contents. Even when manipulations have been completed and the hive closed, it may take some time for the bees to return to the hive. The beekeeper, of course, protects him / herself by wearing a veil, gloves, and so on, and whilst stings are a hazard, the beekeeper himself is usually well protected. Members of the public close by may well be very concerned to find the beekeeper, protected in elaborate equipment, whilst they are working close by with no protection at all. There is a tendency on the part of some bees to follow the beekeeper away from the hive for some distance (these are called "followers") and for this reason beekeepers often keep their veils on for some minutes after they have finished at the hives, to allow the followers time to depart.

The majority of the public are concerned about stings, but the severity of reaction depends on the individual, and the site of the sting. For many, a sting in for instance a hand or arm is a minor inconvenience ... a slight pain, followed by inflammation and itchiness for a few days. A sting near the eye may result in considerable swelling and disfigurement for a few days until the effects wear off. For some there is a severe reaction, anaphylactic shock which could result in death unless receiving prompt medical treatment. Many people are excessively concerned by the presence of bees / beehives, and will be very concerned unless firstly they are appropriately reassured, and secondly unless they are confident about contingency arrangements that are in place should there be a problem. On the other hand there is often a tolerance of the presence of bee hives unless they do cause considerable nuisance, as allotment holders recognise the value of the bees to their own crops and that the risk to them is small.

The tendency of bees to swarm must also be considered. Swarming is a natural phenomenon, when the colony divides naturally and a queen bee departs the nest with, perhaps as many as 15,000 worker bees. The swarm in flight is awesome, making a loud buzzing noise and darkening the sky such is the density of insects in it. The swarm then settles, often though not always, on a tree branch, and there it may stay for several days. During this time scout bees will be searching for a new home, and when a suitable cavity has been identified (perhaps a hollow tree or a chimney) the swarm again takes flight and takes possession of its new home. In fact the swarm itself presents little danger; the bees are docile at this time and unlikely to sting or attack unless they are attacked. Bee keepers often collect swarms with no protection at all. It must though be recognised that a swarm would be very intimidating to the uninitiated.

Bees need a water supply close to their hives, and the "water carriers" may cause concern as they will be seen in some numbers - on puddles, bird baths, beside ponds, or other sources of water

Finally, in the winter, bees will be confined to their hive by the elements, often for a period of some weeks. When the weather is suitable, they will fly voiding the contents of their stomachs - a yellow paste which can be quite staining. Whilst the quantity that each bee produces is quite small, and the area over which the cleansing flights occur is also quite limited (perhaps 9 metres radius), the fall out can be significant and can cause staining of laundry hung out nearby and cars, and this may be a cause for concern to those close by.

## Selection of apiary sites:

For all these reasons, apiaries need to be carefully selected so as to minimise inconvenience to those around, whether neighbours or passers by. Many beekeepers are able to keep bees in, for instance, quite small suburban gardens, and on occasions on flat roofs. Nationally, there are also many beehives maintained on allotments, whether these are provided by the Local Authority or other landlords (some charities have allotment sites for rent, as do e.g.. Railtrack). However it must be recognised that there is always the potential for difficulties if hives are too close to housing, paths, or others who have a legitimate right to use land. There may also be concern by the landlords as to liability should there be a "bee related" loss.

Many beekeepers are unable or reluctant to keep bees in their own gardens, or want to keep more colonies than can sensibly be managed in their gardens. There is a need for "out apiaries", located where there will not be any problems or where problems will be minimal.

Out apiaries are in short supply; ideally they need to be sufficiently isolated not to cause problems, but at the same time be sufficiently accessible to the beekeeper to enable him or her to add and remove items of equipment - hives and hive parts, which can be quite heavy (when the honey crop is lifted, each hive may have produced between 30 and 100 pounds of honey and each "national super" will weigh about 30 lbs.), so reasonable access for, for instance, a trolley or barrow is desirable.

Allotments could provide ideal out apiary sites, beneficial to both the allotment holders and also to the beekeeper. As mentioned, nationally, there are many allotment sites where bees are kept, with little or no problem to the adjoining plot holders. However the rights and concerns of adjoining plot holders have to be recognised and steps taken to minimise the inconvenience. The following strategies have been recommended

Number of Hives	There should be a limit on the number of hives on any one plot; and it is recommended that there should be no more than two hives, and perhaps one "nuc" (small colony) per beekeeper. The number of hives that can be accommodated on any particular site will depend on the size of the site;
Location of hives	Hives need to be located towards the centre of a plot, so that they are not close to the boundary with a neighbour. The exception to this could be if the apiary plot was against a site boundary, in which case the hives could be against the boundary, depending on what the boundary is with .... it would be inappropriate for it to be with housing or paths. the beekeeper should ensure that there is a water supply for the bees on the plot and close to the hives, so the bees do not fly to plunge tanks, or other water sources.
Double plots	Where possible the beekeeper could rent two adjoining allotments, (side by side rather than end to end) so that the hives can be located in the centre of the two plots, achieving valuable extra spacing between the hives and the nearest neighbour.
Spacer plots	Where there is a significant number of vacant plots, the "apiary" plot(s) should be in the in an area where there are 'vacant' plots.

Fencing/ enclosure	Bees can be encouraged to fly at a good height by surrounding the hives with a 2-metre high fence or similar boundary; (bird netting, trellis covered with plants, hedging or tall plants can be adequate). The effect of this will be to make the bees climb above the barrier, and once at a height of about 2 metres they will continue to fly at that height (i.e. above head height) until attracted by a pollen or nectar source.
Membership of local Bee keepers association (or the British Bee Keepers Association)	Membership carries public liability insurance should there be loss or damage as a consequence of the bee keeping.
Swarm control	There are effective methods of swarm control and the beekeeper should practice these, and carry out regular inspections for signs of swarming, and take appropriate steps.  <i>It should be noted that no matter what steps are taken, there will inevitably be occasions when colonies will swarm.</i>
Timing of manipulations	The beekeeper will need to be considerate when carrying out manipulations, that these are not done when there are others nearby or when there are likely to be others nearby before the bees have again settled having been disturbed.
Availability	The beekeeper should ensure that the site manager, knows how to contact him if there is a problem with one of the hives - perhaps a swarm or some vandalism. A sign in the association hut giving phone numbers may be a good idea, if the beekeeper is not likely to be available, he should perhaps arrange with friends that they will provide "cover".
Education	The machinations of a bee colony is completely unknown to many people, but also the source of great interest; beekeepers should always be prepared to discuss the bees with those interested, particularly fellow plot holders, they may even wish, for instance, to display an observation hive at prearrange times so other plot holders can view the bees at work, or keep one or two spare veils so that they can take anyone interested right up to the hive and show them what is going on.
Neighbourliness	The beekeeper should behave sensibly towards those who are likely to be affected by the bee keeping
Temper of the Bees	The beekeeper should be aware of the temper of the bees, and if they are unnecessarily aggressive, then they should be requeened with a queen from a reputable supplier of "docile strains".
Licence	Reports have been received that one local authority is entering into a licence agreement with the local bee keeper's association to enable bees to be kept on allotments; the terms of the licence include provisions as outlined above, and specific restrictions, e.g.

1. that beehives should be removed if annoyance is caused;
2. that the licence is specific to the association or its nominated members only;
3. that the association should be included in the reserve arrangements;
4. that the beekeeper must have a formal qualification in bee keeping (such as the BBA "Basic" examination or equivalent). This would ensure a degree of competence in management and manipulation of bees before being allowed so to do.
5. That the beekeeper is appropriately experienced in the handling of bees - specifically that the beekeeper should not seek to keep bees on an allotment in his first year of beekeeping.

Ealing and District Beekeeper's Association  
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