

## John's Beekeeping Notebook

# Backyard Beekeeping

### Notes on Keeping Bees in Urban and Suburban Neighborhoods

Many beekeepers have bee hives in their back yards. Some bees are even kept on city roof-tops. Bees can travel several miles to collect nectar and pollen, so they do not need flowering plants close by. Most suburbs have plenty of flowers, and bees can make a good crop of local honey.



City beekeepers must take special care so their bees do not become a nuisance to neighbors, or even appear to be a problem. We all want good neighborly relations!

Bee stings are usually neighbors' biggest concern. Usually, beekeepers can care for their bees in ways that allow neighbors to feel safe and comfortable in their yards.

### The Fence

A Fence is important for most backyard beekeepers. A six foot high fence or shrubbery can serve several purposes:

- Forces the bees flight path above people's heads. Bees normally travel in a straight path to their hive, and a fence raises their flight path up over everyone's head. A fence reduces the chance that a bee will accidentally collide with someone walking nearby.
- Creates an "out of sight - out of mind" situation. Some people may be overly concerned about bees in the neighborhood. A fence hides most evidence that managed bees are in the neighborhood.
- Provides wind protection to the hives.



### Water

Honey bees need to collect water, particularly in early spring and during the heat of summer. Bees can be fussy about where they collect water. They seem to love small ponds and creeks. The bees may also drink from a dog's drinking bowl, or a neighbor's bird bath or swimming pool. To deter bees from going to a neighbor's yard for a drink, the suburban beekeeper should provide water for their bees.

Two successful ways to provide water are to (1) Start a small water garden in a half-whiskey barrel with floating plants. The bees seem to love it, since they prefer well-aged water! (2) Use a dripping faucet, with the drips falling on to a wooden board. The dripping faucet is harder to manage, since it must be available at all times when bees are flying so they do not develop a habit of going elsewhere. Bees seem to prefer water that is not TOO close to their hive, so I put a water source at least 20 feet away.



## Swarm Control

There is no practical way to prevent swarming with 100% success. However, swarms are usually very gentle because the bees eat a lot of honey before they swarm.



In the photograph at left, a swarm is scooped up from a neighbor's yard.

Strong colonies with good queens are most likely to swarm. Of course, we want strong colonies. The solution is to keep colonies headed by young queens, less than one year old, because they will swarm less and tend to be strong too. This requires requeening each year with young queens if swarms are likely to be a problem.

When bees swarm, they typically form a cluster within 100 feet of their old hive while scout bees search for a new home. "Bait hives" are a good way to discourage swarms from going into a neighbor's yard. A bait hive is simply an attractive home waiting for a swarm to discover. A good bait hive can be made from an old hive body or nuc hive that is at least one cubic foot in volume and an opening size of about 1 or 2 square inches. The ideal place to put a bait hive is in a shady, wind-protected place, between 10 and 30 feet from the hives, and about ten feet off the ground such as under the eave of a house or between branches of a tree. Bees also prefer to live someplace where bees have lived before, so a

bait hive will be more attractive to the bees if it has an old frame of honey comb in it or otherwise has a good bee-smell.

## Working the Bees

When working inside a hive, it is possible that an angry bee will find an innocent nearby person (other than the beekeeper) to be a suitable target for a sting. Fortunately, there are ways of preventing that from happening!



The defensiveness of bees is greatly influenced by environmental conditions. A beekeeper who works with the bees when conditions are good will have few, if any, angry bees. The same bees that are gentle on one day can become very defensive on another day. The best conditions to work with the bees are when:

- Most of the field bees are out in the field collecting nectar
- When there is a nectar flow from flowering plants
- When the colony is not under stress from predators, such as wasps.
- When colonies are in direct sunlight
- When the temperature is not very hot (95 degrees F or higher)
- When neighbors are not having a lawn party or mowing their yard

Langstroth's first Bee-keeper's Axiom is a good one to remember: *"Bees gorged with honey are not inclined to sting."* This means that the bees will tend to be gentle when there is a nectar flow, when they swarm and following a light smoking.

Bees that are accustomed to movement around their hive reportedly are also less likely to be defensive, so having bushes, trees, a flag or other objects that move in a mild wind are worth considering.

Angry bees are sometimes attracted to lights at night. Bees normally do not fly at night, but if a predator or something else has disturbed the hive, a few bees may attempt to sting the neighbor's porch light. It is best if nearby neighbor's outdoor lights are not in direct view of the hive.

"Yellow rain" can be a minor problem to neighbors' cars that are parked within about 50 feet of the hives. The yellow specks that bees leave when they take cleansing flights wash off easily, but can be unsightly if there are a lot of hives in the area.

## Races of Bees

Most common strains of bees are gentle enough to keep in a city. In the northern U.S., the Carniolan race is most popular. In the southern U.S. and Mexico, the Italian bee is preferred. If a colony is found to be inclined to sting, it should be requeened with gentle stock.

## Bees and the Law

Relatively few communities in the U.S. outlaw beekeeping. However, most have "nuisance laws" that are intended to outlaw things that most people would find objectionable, such as a barking dog or a stinky smell. Some communities have laws that put practical constraints on beekeeping, such as limits on numbers of hives and a requirement that the beekeeper provide water for the bees.

There will be bees in our cities and towns as long as there are nectar and pollen-producing plants. Outlawing beekeeping tends to replace domesticated bees with wild bees, but does not make bees go away.

Prospective beekeepers should learn about legal restrictions before keeping bees. Regardless of the law, a good beekeeper does not allow his bees to annoy neighbors. Sharing a jar or two of honey helps too!

## Farm and Garden Apiaries

Many beekeepers who can not keep bees at home have made arrangements to keep their bees on a nearby farm. Local beekeeping associations can be a good place to find a location to keep bees. Fruit and vegetable gardeners, and gardening clubs, might also know about possible locations, since most gardeners understand the value of pollination.

My bees are at a peach and pear farm. I also have a few colonies in my suburban yard. In the past, I have kept honey bees in the cities of Houston and Dallas, Texas.

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