

Farm Production & Practice

Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries



Honey bees can be kept quite satisfactorily in residential areas, provided certain precautions are taken. However, the good name of beekeeping can easily be spoilt by people who fail to manage their hives properly, and allow them to become a nuisance to neighbours.

Beekeeping Legislation

All apiaries (places where bees are kept) must be registered with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) within 14 days of occupation. This applies even to one hive – it is important for MAF's disease control policy that all apiaries are registered. No charge is made for this service.

In some built-up areas the keeping of bees is also subject to borough or city bylaws. If you intend to keep bees in urban areas, enquire at the nearest MAF office or local council for details. If the local authority requires additional registration of beehives there may be a charge. Local bodies without specific beekeeping bylaws still have power to act against beekeepers under the general nuisance provisions of the Health Act.

If there are no local bylaws controlling beekeeping, good hive management and public relations will help this fortunate situation to continue.

Urban Problems

There are several problems which cause most complaints against beekeepers:

- bee faeces spotting laundry, houses, and cars, especially in the spring;
- swarms;
- "buzzing" of people by bees that have established flight lines which inconvenience neighbours;
- stinging or disturbance by bees in a robbing frenzy, or whose hives have been disturbed;
- bees collecting water from taps, washing, or swimming pools.

In almost all cases of complaints made against beekeepers by neighbours, the beekeeper is at fault.

Advice for Urban Beekeepers

There are a dozen basic rules for good beekeeping in urban areas. Observe them carefully if you wish to avoid creating a beekeeping nuisance.

Beekeeping Urban Areas *Management to Prevent Nuisance*

- In most cases, keep no more than two or three hives on a residential section.
- Give considerable thought to positioning hives so they do not become troublesome. They should be placed in a sunny sheltered spot that is not visible to neighbours. In most cases people do not worry about what they cannot see.
Hives should not be placed close to neighbouring dwellings or driveways, or close to frequently used areas such as vegetable gardens or clotheslines. Don't put them in inaccessible areas like steep banks or garage roofs where they are difficult to work.
For further information on apiary sites, see AgLinks FPP 535, 537.
- Force the bees to fly at least 2 m high as soon as they leave their hives, by placing the hives within a few metres of a screen (fence, trellis, or hedge). This keeps the bees flying well above human head height, and will prevent neighbours being "buzzed".
- If bees do establish flight patterns that are a nuisance, there are several ways of overcoming the problem. The hives could be removed at least 5 km away for 3–4 weeks and then returned to the original site. By this time most of the field bees that remember the old site will have died, and the new field bees may establish new flight paths.
An alternative is to leave the hives on site and rotate them through 180°. Block the entrances loosely with green grass. This may confuse the bees enough for them to adopt new flight patterns.
- Provide clean, fresh water within 6 m of the hives all year round. This may reduce visits of thirsty bees to neighbours' swimming pools, wet washing, and dripping taps.
Bees can be provided with water by letting a tap drip on to sandy soil or by leaving a container full of water that is regularly changed, and provided with some floatation material for the bees to land on. Wood shavings or an aquarium plant make suitable floatation material.
- Maintain a gentle strain of bee in every hive. Pure strains of yellow or leather-coloured Italian bees are the best in New Zealand conditions. All queen bee producers supply gentle strains of bees for hobbyist beekeepers. Temperamental hives must be requeened promptly, and all hives requeened every one or two years.

- Select the best time of day for working hives. Bees are quietest during a nectar flow and a period of fine, warm weather. Hives should only be manipulated on good days, when neighbours are not nearby.
- Once confidence is gained in handling bees, it is best not to wear gloves while working the hives. Stings on the hands are easily removed and the pain quickly passes. Stings on gloves, however, are not felt, and the scent associated with the sting encourages other bees to sting. The beekeeper won't feel the stings, but neighbours might.
- Swarming must be prevented by the use of proper techniques. The most important of these is requeening hives every one or two years with well-bred queens of a gentle, non-swarming strain. Other measures include preventing a congested brood chamber by rotating brood boxes several times during spring, and preventing a congested hive by adding honey supers in advance of the hive's requirements. Swarm prevention is discussed in detail in *Practical Beekeeping in New Zealand*.
- Never expose honey or honey combs for longer than is absolutely necessary, as this may start robbing activity. Particular care is needed in spring and after the honey flow is finished. Late afternoon is the best time for feeding hives, putting on wet honey supers, and transferring swarms into hives.
- Be a good beekeeping neighbour. Collect swarms quickly, after first advising neighbours not to interfere and to keep children away. Destroy any feral hives (bees established in buildings and trees). For details of suitable methods, see AgLink FPP 392.
- Stress the value of bees for pollinating fruit and some vegetables. Create goodwill by sharing a portion of the honey crop with neighbours.

Beekeeping Problems in Towns

Bees do very well in built-up areas, as a wide variety of nectar and pollen sources give a reliable and prolonged honey flow and plenty of pollen for trapping. Despite the advantages, however, there are problems associated with beekeeping in urban areas.

The risk of spread of American foulbrood (AFB) disease is very real, given the high hive concentration (including some unregistered ones), and hobbyists' general unfamiliarity with disease symptoms. Well-meaning but misinformed gardeners may also spread the AFB spores which cause this disease by spraying fruit trees with a honey/water mixture, or even putting such a mixture out to attract birds. Both these practices should be avoided. See AgLink FPP 124 for details of the symptoms and control of AFB.

Damage to colonies by careless use of insecticides is also a constant risk in towns and cities.

Further reading:

FPP 124: Brood diseases/In honey bees/Significance and control.
 FPP 392: Honey bees/Swarms and feral hives/Eradication.
 FPP 535: Beekeeping/Apiary sites/How to prevent drifting.
 FPP 537: Beekeeping/Apiary sites/Selecting and planning.
 Matheson, Andrew, 1984. *Practical Beekeeping in New Zealand* (Government Printer).

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