

Keeping Bees on Allotments: A Factsheet for Allotment Tenants



The Allotment Team have received a number of enquiries from tenants interested in keeping bees on their allotments so we have produced this factsheet with some tips and advice for potential bee keepers.

Introduction

There have been quite a few media stories around the plight of British bees recently, which have inspired many people to want to help. There are around 250 species of British bees, including 24 types of bumblebee, honey bees and a variety of small solitary bees, however many of these are struggling and some are even threatened with extinction. It is estimated that bees pollinate up to 1/3 of all food grown in this country and that this is worth hundreds of millions of pounds to the British economy.

Gardens and allotments are crucial to supporting bees as they have such a wide range of plants and trees which flower from early spring to late autumn providing nectar and pollen for bees. This factsheet will give you some tips and suggestions for whether you simply want to encourage more bees to visit your plot or whether you want to become a fully fledged bee keeper.



Making your plot bee friendly

There are a whole host of bee friendly flowers that you can plant to attract bees to your plot. Here is a selection: lavender, thyme, red clover (also a green manure), honey suckle, foxglove, poppy, bird's foot trefoil, etc. Bee friendly fruit and veg includes apples, pears, raspberries, courgettes, runner beans and squash.



A simple way of helping the bees that do visit your plot is to reduce the amount of chemicals you use (or even better go organic!), particularly pesticides which will kill the bees as well as the pests.

Another quick and easy tip is to create some habitat for solitary bees. Offer bee nesting boxes (or even upturned clay plant pots filled with hollow canes or plant stems). The Bug Life website has advice on making your own bee nest boxes (www.buglife.org.uk). This is a great activity to do with kids!

Bee happy!

There is nothing quite like the sound of busy bees bumbling round the flower beds or vegetable patch to epitomise lazy summer days! Here are some of the advantages and disadvantages of keeping bees on your allotment:



Advantages

Who could fail to be charmed by the site of bees buzzing about?

Bee keeping is a fascinating hobby which has been around for 5,000 years and can be very rewarding.

Thanks to bees being great pollinators, allotments which encourage bees or have bee hives located on them can expect fruit trees and other crops to be more productive.

Bees produce useful by-products as well as honey, including beeswax, propolis and royal jelly which can be made into a range of products from candles to face cream.

Responsibly kept bee hives on your plot can be a real talking point and can bring tenants together as people come to see how your bees are getting on and take an interest in the hive.

Modern hives sometimes have clear plastic observation panels which are great for showing people the inner workings of the hive. This makes them easy to study and is a great way of getting children interested in nature and the environment. Also, involving and educating your neighbouring tenants in the hive is the best way to overcome any objections you may face.

Bees need all the help they can get so installing a hive will give a boost to this fascinating and crucial insect. Bee friendly gardens also attract a variety of other insect life including butterflies and ladybirds.

Disadvantages

At its peak during the summer months a single bee hive can contain 50,000 bees, which is great for pollinating crops but can be intimidating for people close by.

When the hive is opened (for observation or honey collecting) large numbers of bees will exit the hive and fly around. This may be frightening for your neighbouring tenants, particularly if they see the bee keeper in their protective gear and they are just in normal clothes. Try to limit opening the hive to times when there are fewer people about or when the bees are very active so that there are fewer of them in the hive in the first place.

Stings! Many people are very concerned about being stung by bees. This is where involving your neighbouring tenants in the process of deciding on, and setting up, your hives can reassure them about how the bees will behave and that you have taken their concerns into account when siting the hive.

Bees can (and at some point most probably will) swarm. This is a spectacular sight but, again, can frighten those not used to bees. Swarming is a natural behaviour for bees and may even be a crucial part of reproduction.

Experienced bee keepers know how to deal with a swarm and will catch the bees in a "skep".

Bees need a water supply near their hive so if you don't provide one your neighbour may find large numbers of bees congregating around his duck pond!

When bees are confined to the hive for a period due to inclement weather there will be a build up of waste products. When the weather improves the bees will dispose of this waste (a yellow paste) as they leave the hive. This may make a mess on nearby cars or laundry which won't make you popular so, again, careful siting of the hive is a must.



Being a considerate bee keeper

Keeping bees on an allotment successfully is all about careful planning, involving your neighbours and the allotment landlords from the start, and following these basic guidelines:

Siting your hive

Ensure that the bees are encouraged to rise at least 6 feet before leaving your plot by the use of screening. This means that the bees will be above head height and out of the way. This screening could be natural hedging, wooden fencing or fine plastic or wire mesh screening. This also has the added advantage of screening your hives from view, which can help to avoid vandalism or theft.



Ensure that the flight path of your bees is not directly across other plots, pathways or communal areas. Depending on where your plot is situated this may mean that a bee hive would not be appropriate for your plot. If this is the case, perhaps you could team up with another tenant and put your hive with theirs. Alternatively you could research “out apiaries” in the area, where your hive can be kept off site. Contact your local bee keeping association for more information.



Find out whether there are other hives in the area. If there are too many hives in one place there will not be enough nectar or pollen for all the bees and your hive’s productivity will decrease.

Join the local bee keeping association

Inexperienced bee keepers should not keep bees without the support of an experienced bee keeper. It is a condition for Council

allotment tenants that anyone wishing to keep bees must be a member of the local bee keeping association. This has the benefit of providing lots of advice, help and training, and members also receive public liability insurance as part of their membership. Contact details for bee keeping associations are provided at the end of the factsheet.

Handling your bees

Try to limit opening the hive to times when there are fewer people about or when the bees are very active so that there are fewer of them in the hive in the first place. Do not handle your bees when other people are gardening close by. Consider investing in an extra set of protective clothing so interested neighbours can come and see the bees close up. This can help allay any fears they may have.

Safety

Your local bee keeping association can advise you on matters such as what protective clothing you will need and how to manage your bees safely. It is also a good idea to have someone with you when you open your hive, partly to assist as a hive full of honey is really heavy, but also in case of emergencies.

If your bees are particularly aggressive, they should be “re-queened” with a queen from a docile strain.

Arrangements for when you are not there

If you are planning to go away on holiday you will need someone to care for your bees, but it is also a good idea to make sure that your fellow tenants know what to do if something happens whilst you are not on your plot. At the least, you should make sure that your contact details are kept somewhere on site and that the Council is aware that you have bees on your plot and can contact you.

It is probably best to provide a mobile number if you can, as there is no point them ringing a landline in case of a problem and no one answers. If the other allotment holders are happy that they know what to do if there is a problem and that they will be able to get hold of you, they are far less likely to be hostile to the idea of a hive on the site.



Where to get your bees

Your local bee keeping association can help with sourcing both bees and equipment. Hives should never be bought “off the back of a lorry” or from the side of the road as they will more than likely have been stolen. In addition, if you don’t buy from a reputable dealer you have no way of knowing the health of the bees, which could cause infections and parasites to spread.

Some points to note

Bees don’t like certain materials and will be more inclined to sting if they encounter them. These include leather (e.g. wristwatch straps) and fleece (e.g. jackets). They also don’t like the smell of alcohol, so avoid wearing aftershave or perfume when visiting the hive.

Bee stings are acidic (unlike wasp stings which are alkaline) so a sting can be treated with a mild alkali, such as bicarbonate of soda or borax.

Bees sometimes follow the bee keeper for some distance when they leave the hive, which is why bee keepers usually keep their veils on for a little while after seeing to the hive to allow these “followers” to depart.



Useful websites

Name	Website
Cleveland Bee Keeping Association	www.teesbees.co.uk
British Bee Keeping Association	www.bbka.org.uk
North East Bee Keeping Convention	www.nebees.org
Bee Base National Bee Unit	https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/
Bee Craft: The Journal for Bee Keepers and Apiarists	www.bee-craft.com
Bug Life	www.buglife.org.uk



References

- Cambridge Bee Keepers Association
- Ealing and District Bee Keepers Association
- National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners
- National Trust

All images courtesy of The Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera), Crown Copyright