

A beginner's guide to beekeeping

Whether you want to harvest your own honey, or bring bees into the garden as pollinators, here's Virgil Evetts' beginner's guide to beekeeping.



About year ago I added honey bees to my backyard jungle. After numerous stings and a spectacular swarm, my respect and appreciation for *Apis mellifera* continues to grow. Unlike some gentleman farmer conceits, urban beekeeping has profound and far-reaching benefits, well beyond the confines of my section and the copious rewards of home-grown honey. We need bees. Most fruit trees and vegetable crops rely on their fastidious ministrations as nature's arch pollinators. Albert Einstein once predicted that people would last perhaps four years without bees, so great is their role in food production. Let's hope this theory remains untested.

START WITH AN EXPERT

I found my hive on TradeMe, and for my money acquired not just a healthy colony of well-mannered bees, but the go-to expertise of seasoned bee professional Alastair Little. No amount of reading and theoretical knowledge can compare to having access to a bee guru like Alastair. He was given a beehive for his 13th birthday and bees have been a major part of his life ever since. He's worked as a commercial beekeeper and queen bee breeder, supplying selectively bred queens to apiarists in New Zealand and all around the world. Now semi-retired, Alastair continues to keep a few hives in his backyard as well as selling starter hives on TradeMe.

Bees are uber-complex creatures and having someone to interpret their behaviour is invaluable. If I could offer one piece of advice to any prospective beekeeper it would be don't fly solo. Find a mentor, join a club and subscribe to an online forum like on the Oooby network. I also spoke to Maureen Maxwell, who started the cafe and honey business BeesOnline. She is the Northern Ward representative for the National Beekeepers Association. (The NBA works to support and protect the interests of beekeepers nationwide, from backyard hobbyist to commercial keepers, some of whom manage up to 27000 hives). Maureen also strongly suggests new-bees join both the NBA, and their local bee clubs. She offers the following incentives to

Join a club: club members can teach you how to spot diseases and assist with mandatory hive inspections. They can offer insight into different perspectives and philosophies of beekeeping. Plus clubs buy equipment and supplies in bulk and offer members excellent discounts. And since bees have varying needs according to where they live, club members will have local experience and expertise.

KEEP IT LEGAL

All beekeepers in New Zealand are legally obliged to register their hives with AsureQuality. Failing to do so is illegal and highly irresponsible. Many industries are reliant on bees, either directly or indirectly, and a major outbreak of disease (such as American Foul Brood) could be devastating to our economy. Hive registration costs a mere \$31 per year. Most councils allow one to two hives to be kept on a suburban section without any formal consent (but check first). Without painful provocation your neighbours have no right to obstruct your beekeeping endeavours, but it's only fair to keep them informed of what you're doing. Be mindful that if your bees become a serious and legitimate nuisance, your local authority can insist that you remove the hive. The best way to avoid neighbour-related conflict is to keep your bees out of sight. A hive positioned in full view of the street will attract more complaints than one hidden away in your backyard. Good bees don't go looking for trouble – and neither do good neighbours.

Whoa, Varroa!

In the past, even if no one kept bees near you, you could rely on feral hives to do the work. Sadly, no more. The arrival in 2000 of bee parasite varroa destructor, saw the rapid loss of feral bees almost nationwide. That's when I got into beekeeping. My neighbourhood was bereft of honey bees, and whatever pollination occurred was thanks to the imperfect efforts of bumblebees. But bumblebees don't emerge from hibernation early enough to service the more precocious flowering fruit trees; and they simply don't have the numbers to do a thorough job. A healthy honey bee colony comprises 35,000 workers, but bumble bees rarely exceed the hundreds. Don't bother thinking you'll escape varroa. You won't. There's no legal obligation to treat your hives for varroa, but failing to do so would be pretty stupid.

The painful truth

If you keep bees you're going to get stung sooner or later. I discovered this within a few days of installing my hive. However, stinging results in the death of the assailant, so it's usually a last resort when they feel threatened or believe that the hive is in danger. Every time I have been stung, it has happened because I wasn't being careful enough.

Listen to your bees

Over time I've come to understand the moods of my hive. I can tell when the girls are losing their patience with my meddling, or when they aren't up to entertaining at all. The best way to avoid being chased around your garden by a posse of pissed-off bees is to listen to them. Bees always say what they mean and categorically mean what they say.

A breed apart

While any old hive of honey bees will produce honey, not any old hive should be kept in an urban environment – not if you want to spend time in your garden or stay onside with your neighbours. Like the world of canines, bee-world is teeming with variety. There are aggressive pit bull-like breeds of honey bees and mellow, dopey, Labrador types too. It's important to find out as much as you can about the parentage of the bees you are acquiring. An angry, sting-happy hive of no account bees will make you very unpopular with your neighbours.

I'm allergic

Serious allergies to bee stings are rare (well below 1%), but they certainly do exist. If you or a near neighbour falls into this unfortunate category, think carefully before proceeding. Even the most accommodating person is unlikely to forgive anaphylactic shock in a hurry.

The swarm

Swarming was one of my biggest fears as a prospective beekeeper. I knew it was inevitable but had rather hoped I could avoid it for a year or two. Alas. Thanks to the rich pickings of the urban landscape, with tasty bee-treats in almost every backyard, an unusually warm start to the season and my general inexperience, things got out of hand. So on a warm clear morning in early September, many thousands of bees roared out of the hive, and swirled over my garden like a living storm cloud. I'd been told that if you're lucky, between the wild aerial activity and flying off for good, a swarm will settle in an accessible spot where you can collect them to start a new hive. Unfortunately my swarm chose to settle 20 metres up a very spindly tree before leaving en masse for places unknown. Swarming is a natural function of a hive, but it's a nuisance to beekeepers as it seriously depletes the work force. Although it's an alarming sight – and sound – swarming bees are very rarely aggressive. Unlike in the movies.

Tools and tips

Apart from the hive and bees there aren't many essentials for small-scale beekeepers, but I couldn't do without:

- **Hive tool.** This flattened metal lever is essential for prizing apart gummed-up supers (bee boxes), lifting frames of honeycomb and any number of other heavy duty hive jobs.

- **Smoker.** If you want to open your hive without incurring the wrath of a lot of irate bees, a smoker is essential.
- **Bee Suit.** Until you are completely comfortable around your bees, a protective bee suit is a good idea. Although I no longer use my suit most of the time, it's reassuring to know it's there.
- **Spare frames & boxes.** Bee populations expand quickly over summer and you will need several more stories (complete with frames of wax) on hand and ready to add.
- **Queen excluder.** The queen excluder is a wire grid that keeps the queen separate from the honey boxes. Essential unless you fancy bee larvae in your honey.
- **Varroa treatment strips.** No arguments.