

So you want to keep bees? - a lighthearted look at what is involved!

So you want to keep bees. Why? Do you fancy yourself in a bee suit? Do you like the rustic image of the hive at the bottom of the garden? Do you want to save the planet's plants, flowers and crops?

Do not say it is because you like bees. Bees are insects. Since when did you start finding insects interesting? Bees take no notice of you, and when they do, it is painful. So let us be honest. You really want to keep bees because ... ? That is right, because you want to be able to hand over a pot of honey to your friends with your own label on the jar. Fine. That will do. It is a lot of work to get to that point, but you are up for it. Good enough.

What to do First

Join your local group of beekeepers. Go to their meetings. Help with the teas, help with the raffle. This gets you chatting to people and you learn things. You learn that it is the old buffers who have been doing the business for seventy years who are bursting with advice and instruction. Everyone else is as wary and nervous as you are. You learn that beekeeping is done by men with big sheds. And you learn that some of the best beekeepers are women because they have minds broad enough to hold the hundreds of small but vital jobs involved. There will also be a smattering of young people, because bees are cool right now

so lots of people are keen on bees.

Bees are 'on trend'. It is the year of the bee. Every year is the year of the bee. You just have to ignore the fact that the practice of beekeeping is actually a religion. Its adherents wear special vestments, they worship a queen, their patron saints are Ambrose and Brother Adam, and their mystical ceremonies have names like Bailey Comb Change and Shook Swarm. Beekeepers keep a sacred flame called pollination. Their colour code is gold and they are the nation's champions going out to fight mite and foul disease, Marie Celeste hive syndrome and toxic pesticides.

Religions, like swimming pools, have a shallow end and a deep end. At the deep end of beekeeping you find pathology and microscopy, genetics and pathogens, pheromones and the intricacies of successful insect sex. At the shallow end there is getting the smoker to puff out lots of really fluffy white smoke; there is knocking a swarm off a branch into your box and carrying it home; and there is popping a piece of dripping comb in your mouth, still warm from the hive. Between these poles of magical moments there waits an amazing range of experiences - with some moments to savour and some moments best forgotten; like finding there is a bee up your trouser leg, which stops you in your tracks.

The Beekeeping Year

First of all, bear this in mind. Beekeepers and Mafiosi have quite a lot in common. You do the protection, you fight off the competition, you take the payment - in liquid assets. What is the competition? Well: woodpeckers, mice, bears, moths, hobbits and er... bees. You beat all these other robbers off then take your own percentage in late summer, which is when the beekeeper's year begins. The bees give you their honey and you give them back sugar syrup. Fair exchange? Put it like this, they have laboured for months to refine a delicately layered five-storey black forest gateau, then you come along, whip it away and give them a slice of bread and margarine instead. Perhaps, though, it helps to remember that

the honey has made a return journey through the bees' guts once already so do not feel too bad. They have already had one taste of it. And of course, you do not take all of it, you leave some for them. Remember, these are 'a people' who have to spend winter in a group hug in darkness. That little taste you leave them of last summer has to last a while. Late summer is also the time of year when you bring out your weapons to fight the mite. You lay down thymol in the hive. Later, in the quiet of winter, you may trickle acid over the combs. After Christmas you put your vertebrae out trying to lift the hives to feel the weight of the stores. And then a few weeks later you put it out again heaving brood boxes about because you are trying to give them all fresh clean floors.

Before spring opens up fully, though, there comes the occasional golden windless day. A balmy, shining day that takes you completely by surprise. A gift heralding the-summer-to-come, freely given from the cloudless blue skies. The sun is warm on your skin, bees are out drawing ellipses through the bright air, emptying their little bowels after winter's constipation (duck, watch your white suit). You lift out a few frames to spot some early capped brood, - and there she is, your lovely queen jostling among her progeny. This is her promise of things to come. The beekeeper's spring, like every fisherman's outing, is always full of hope.

In the late spring you buy your partner chocolates and flowers because you cannot go away on holiday. Why? 'Because I have to do a weekly inspection of the hives.' Why? 'To knock off queens.' You are going to knock off queens? What kind of hobby do you call that? 'Sorry.' Spinning off the honey does not make things any better. Buckets and muslin and jars litter the kitchen. Everything now is sticky. And the kitchen floor has bits of wax stuck to it for weeks. Your little pyramid of honey jars out on display on the dresser does not attract admiration. Is that all you have got? You do not get much bang for your buck, do you? 'Well, it was a bad year.' You say that every year. What about that beekeeper you keep telling me

about who gets a ton of honey?
'He has got a tractor.'

High summer and you are lifting out and studying frames daily. Every frame tells a story. But you are not sure what the story is and you badly need a buddy to talk it through. Trouble is, everyone is too busy beekeeping. There is no one to ask. Do not panic. You stick to the 'To Do' list. Why am I here? What am I looking for? 'I am looking for healthy brood, I am looking for tight biscuit-coloured capping, I am looking for eggs, I am looking for the queen, I am looking for drone cappings and for honey stores, I am looking for varroa mite and for signs of disease, and still looking for the blasted queen ...' Never mind, you are on your own, so this is when you learn – because you make mistakes. It is okay. Everyone does. Your mistakes teach you better than any book. Your most common error will be omission: 'Dammit, I had the hive open and I had the bee suit on – I should have ...'

You and the Neighbours

In May and June you become wary of the telephone. 'Hello? You are the bee keeper, aren't you?' Guarded pause. You might be ... Is the voice sounding angry? 'There is a swarm of bees in my apple tree. Could you possibly ...?' Most calls like this turn out to be a boon. You improve your local PR no end, because the lay public tends to be very wary of thirty thousand bees that have shaped themselves into a rugby ball in their garden. People are full of gratitude to you for coming and sorting them out. And you get more bees. You can either keep them and start a new colony, or tip them into an existing hive. Check them over carefully first, though, to see they are free of disease. Catching swarms is fun. Whatever it is they are hanging on to, branch, or bush or wall, it is never a tenacious grip, a few taps and the black clumps of bees fall down into your skep like lumps of .well, black forest gateau. Then you tie them up into a sheet and carry them off. Your swag!

Final Thoughts

There is a benign 'masonic' fellowship in the craft of bee keeping. It is an ancient wisdom, the partnership of mankind and bees in all cultures all over the world going back thousands of years. Rome's greatest poet Virgil wrote about bees BC. The San bushmen of the Kalahari follow the honey guide bird to bee colonies in trees. In the mountains of Lebanon bees hived in clay jars forage on fields of cannabis.

Recipes involving honey are legion. You do not actually eat honey; it eats you. Put a spoon of honey in your mouth. You do not chew it, you do not even swallow it, it just sinks away into your metabolism, like sweet waters sinking into desert sands . honeycomb? Everybody loves a beekeeper. And anyone is allowed to have a go. The ancient alchemy of creating conditions for bees to collect pollen and nectar and turn it into honey. Does any other pursuit take you nearer to the mysterious essence of nature? Honey comes to us from the next world. No wonder beekeeping is almost a religion. And remember this: everyone does it differently, and that is okay. There are ground rules, of course. These are dictated by seasons and bee behaviour. But how you juggle your brood boxes and your supers, how you nip the swarming in the bud, how you use a Snelgrove board, how you manipulate your queens and increase your colonies, all of that is up to you. Everyone has their own practice. No one is right; and everybody is right. Beekeeping is both a science and an art. Let the old boys tell you what they do. Stand beside a practised beekeeper and watch as (s)he goes through the hive and you will see that a beekeeper has slow hands. And read Wedmore and Clive de Bruyn and Ted Hooper. Browse the kit catalogues. Go to the beginner's course. Do not beat yourself up over mistakes; if you have learned a lesson then it is not a mistake. And do not let anyone tell you do not look foxy in a bee suit.

You do.

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