



Keeping Honeybees in the Urban Landscape: *Strategies for Beekeepers and Regulators*

by Malcolm T. Sanford
University of Florida

There's a revolution going on in the nation's cities. Increased media attention caused by widespread reports about honeybees disappearing has produced a renaissance in beekeeping. The vast majority of those entering the craft are urban residents. People are drawn to raising honeybees (apiculture) for a variety of reasons, including harvesting a range of products (honey, pollen, beeswax) and providing pollination for fruits and vegetables in urban gardens.

Unfortunately, honeybees are stinging insects. Many people are convinced without much evidence that they, their children and their pets are in imminent danger from any stinging insects, which are usually lumped into a general category labeled as "bees." This is often heightened by sensationalized news stories that can accompany any stinging incident. Some urban residents, therefore, see beekeeping as a risky enterprise. In certain parts of the nation, the presence of what are known as Africanized honeybees (often called "killer bees" by the news media) makes the activity even more problematic in some people's minds.

Given the general sense of fear about stinging insects, many people can't understand why anyone would take up the craft of keeping bees and actually interact with the insects. Those who have become beekeepers, meanwhile, often are not empathetic of their neighbors' fears. This can lead to conflicts that are not easily resolved.

Disagreements of any sort involving beekeeping in an urban setting are often resolved by local homeowners associations and governments simply

forbidding beekeeping as a "nuisance" under some overarching ordinance. But although it might be considered an easy response, banning beekeeping is often counterproductive. That's because removing managed colonies of honeybees results in an ecological vacuum that can be quickly filled by other wild insects.

Ironically, such a scenario can create a greater risk for local residents than that characterized by beekeeper-managed colonies. This is particularly true in places where Africanized honeybees are established. People choosing to keep honeybees are taught that the insects they manage provide a direct defense against the establishment of wild, uncontrolled honeybees. Courses in beekeeping instruct beekeepers to say no to keeping wild, Africanized honeybees, which are known for their aggressiveness. Rather, beekeepers are urged to confine activities to domesticated honeybees of European origin that are not as inclined to sting.

Beekeeping trends in major cities reflect this philosophy. Over the past few years, New York City; Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and many other urban areas have reversed longstanding regulations banning the craft. This has provided much richer biotic environments in urban settings, while increasing the number of activities residents can use to become more productive citizens.

Although the activity may be legalized, that does not mean that no regulations are appropriate for keeping honeybees. Most beekeepers realize that managing honeybees must be looked at more as a privilege than a

right, and are happy to self-regulate their activities. These often take the form of best management practices designed to protect all residents.

Effective beekeeping requires a series of specialized skills often used in concert with each other. Local homeowners associations and governments seldom have the personnel or expertise to adequately regulate this kind of activity. Banning beekeeping is not a panacea, as noted above, and like many activities, declaring it illegal may simply drive committed practitioners underground. In states with strong bee inspection and registration programs, beekeepers work with regulators to provide a legal way for city residents to keep honeybees without becoming a nuisance.

Florida beekeepers are regulated by a formalized bee inspection service and are required to register with the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. In addition, the Florida State Beekeepers Association, in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' bee inspection program and the University of Florida's Honeybee Research and Extension Laboratory, urges and educates its members to pursue a proactive, self-policing policy. It is the preferred way to ensure that beekeeping will be regarded by all residents of the Sunshine State as the valuable public service that it is.

Malcolm T. Sanford is a professor emeritus of entomology at the University of Florida. Additional information is available at <http://apisenterprises.com/store/>.