The British Beekeepers' Association

National Beekeeping Centre, Stoneleigh-park, Stoneleigh, Warwickshire CV8 2LG

Tel: 02476 696679; Fax: 02476 690682; e-mail: bbka@britishbeekeepers.com

Allotments and Beekeeping

This document is produced in a 'Question and Answer' style. It is intended to inform and show how beekeeping can co-exist with allotment working. Further detailed guidance for allotment managers can be found in the BBKA leaflet "Allotment Beekeeping". This information can be used as required when considering the placing of beehives on an allotment for the first time. For advice to allotment managers and beekeepers regarding situations where beekeeping already takes place on an allotment, the BBKA produces another leaflet "Allotment Beekeeping".

Background

Allotments were first created in their current form in the mid 1800s to provide cultivation space for householders and tenants who had no land with the higher density housing and landowning laws at that time.

In the UK, allotments are small parcels of land rented to individuals usually for the purpose of growing food crops. There is no set standard size but the most common plot is 10 rods, an ancient measurement equivalent to 302 square yards or 253 square metres.

Initially there was no restriction in whether these crops were grown in the ground or managed, later on some restrictions were introduced for livestock but in 1950 specific regulations were introduced to allow the keeping of poultry and rabbits. The wording in the 1950 Act allows the keeping of hens or rabbits as long as it is not for trade or business and the keeping shall not be prejudicial to health or cause a nuisance.

The current government position on beekeeping as expressed on direct.gov is that beekeeping is acceptable as long as it is not prohibited by local regulations and in the DTLR document ' Allotments : a plot holders guide' where it is states that Beekeeping is allowed on some allotment sites. In this document beekeeping is treated as a separate subject from livestock.

The above references would indicate that there seems to be a general acceptance of beekeeping unless specifically prohibited but that certain regulations may apply to local sites.

Q1. Why are honey bees important?

Honey bees are one of the most effective flower and fruit pollinators in nature. This arises partly from the size of the colony during the summer and partly because of the outstanding organisation of their foraging and pollination activity. Honey bees and flowers have evolved together over millions of years – their relationship is one of the most important on the planet. In the UK, the direct pollination value of crops due to honey bees is estimated at between £160M and £200M. In the USA, crops pollinated by honey bees have values in "billions of dollars' range. About one-third of the crops we eat rely on honey bee pollination, as well as many other plants which support other creatures in the environment.

Q2. Why should 'allotment managers' promote beekeeping?

There are lots of reasons. On the larger scale of things, bees promote biodiversity in the environment by providing crops for many birds and other small creatures to live on. They help pollinate crops which can be used to recover old industrial 'brown space' and they help create opportunities for Local Authorities to work with other conservation groups.

The enhanced food production due to the presence of adequate numbers of honey bees helps to reduce food-miles and the cost of food, leading to meeting 'green' objectives.

On a smaller scale, they help with allotment productivity and quality of produce, produce honey and create interest amongst young people in all things natural. Virtually all fruit and seed crop production on the allotment will benefit from honey bee pollination and all plot holders should benefit.

Finally, beekeeping is a valuable social and educational activity (like allotment keeping itself) and promotes activity and well-being.

Q3. What are the other insects I see on the allotment?
Many insects fly and visit plants. Some of these are flies, which mimic the colours of other insects such as wasps to avoid being eaten. These are harmless.

There are solitary bees (such as those for which little 'tube nests' kits are commonly sold). Again, these are harmless- they do not sting and do not swarm.

Wasps are carnivorous and more aggressive than honey bees – the two are often confused as they are of similar size – but very different colours. Wasps die out in the winter – they leave behind nests made of paper in sheds and hanging in dense bushes. These are often eaten by badgers, which seem immune to the stings. Wasps have value in the spring – they eat aphids and greenfly in large numbers.

Bumble bees are larger than honey bees and furrier. The queen (about the size of the end of your thumb) is seen in spring; her daughters who are smaller are seen in summer and autumn. Again, all die out in the winter, just like wasps. Bumble bees can sting but are very, very difficult to provoke. They do not swarm. They nest under sheds, in old mouse holes and in compost heaps and so on. In the wild they are becoming very rare, so ideally they should be left undisturbed. They become more active in the spring earlier than honey bees, so are useful as pollinators for early-flowering crops.

Honey bees can forage for about 5km from their hive, so even if there are no beehives on the allotment, some are likely to be visiting from 'outside' – there will ALWAYS be honey bees on allotments if there are flowers and bee hives are in the area.

Q4. What about stings?
Wasps and honey bees can both sting. On average, wasps are more aggressive and likely to sting 'without reason'. Honey bees sting only if they think their hive (which contains food and young bees) is being threatened. Aggressive honey bees should not be tolerated by any beekeeper (regardless of where the hive is kept) and can be made docile by changing the queen to produce more docile offspring.

When a honey bee stings a person or animal it will die – the bee is disembowelled in the process. It is therefore a measure of last resort to the bees. Wasps can sting repeatedly and are not harmed in the process.

Wasp and honey bee stings are often confused. If you are stung and NO STING REMAINS behind, the insect is 95% likely to be a wasp, not a honey bee.

The BBKA 'Allotment Beekeeping' leaflet contains more advice on limiting the risk of stings.

Q5. I have a bad reaction to stings- what is going on?
People react to stings in a number of ways - the human immune system is very complex. Also, having a particular reaction to a honey bee sting is not an indication of a similar reaction to a wasps' sting and so on; sting responses are very specific, like food allergies. It is very easy to confuse a normal and a severe reaction to stings.

The NORMAL reaction to a sting is a sharp pain, swelling and itching that may take several days to disappear. The swelling may be large, depending on where the sting is. Stings were there is little tissue (e.g. on the scalp or ankle) often produce more swelling. Again, this may be uncomfortable for a while, but it is not life-threatening (unless in the mouth or nose) and is normal. Even beekeepers suffer in this way! Anti-histamine creams and tablets will help reduce the symptoms.

A SEVERE reaction to beekeeping involves a response of the immune system termed 'anaphylactic shock'. This is the same as, for instance, reaction to a nut allergy. Anaphylactic shock is characterised by a specific, sudden and fast reaction to the sting (regardless of the insect involved), causing a rapid drop in blood pressure, tingling around the mouth, fainting and abdominal pain. This may occur in a matter of minutes. More medical information can be found, for instance, on the NHS website. In this case, the situation should be treated as a medical emergency. Unless you have these kinds of reactions, you do not have a serious reaction to stings.

If you do experience this sort of reaction to any extent, you should seek medical advice about desensitisation therapy as a matter of course.

Anaphylactic reactions are very, very rare and are often confused with normal reactions to stings. The number of deaths through all insect stings in the UK is very low (one or two per year) – more are caused by drivers and motor-cyclists having an accident as a result of an insect entering their vehicle while moving.

In some persons, the surprise or pain of a sting can produce a heart attack, like other shocks. Again, this is not an anaphylactic reaction.

Q6. Are bee livestock?

This question often arises in connection with allotment beekeeping. The Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 says “The expressions “agriculture” and “cultivation” shall include horticulture and the use of land for any purpose of husbandry inclusive of the keeping or breeding of livestock, poultry, or bees, and the growth of fruit, vegetables, and the like”.

Later Acts made some specific law to bar animals such as pigs and cockerels, partly on public health groups. The 1905 act does not explicitly ban the keeping of bees, but does allow a Local Authority to create Bylaws which may have this effect.

It is often quoted that bees are 'livestock'. This is debateable and at least one Local Authority in England takes the view that they are not. 'Livestock' is generally understood to be domesticated and managed animals bred for human consumption or benefit. This is not the case with bees; all honey bees are wild – they only 'belong' to the beekeeper as long as they stay in the hive, otherwise they are any-ones' for the taking. As stated earlier, there will always be some bees on an allotment so allowing beekeeping is adding to a population that is already there.

Tenancy agreements vary enormously in their provisions – we encourage these to permit beekeeping explicitly with appropriate safeguards.

Q7. What about swarms?

Honey bees swarm as part of the natural reproductive cycle of social insects. While swarms appear alarming, the bees are actually far less likely to be aggressive as they are concentrating on finding a new home. Usually the swarm subsides in an hour or so and can be collected. All competent beekeepers seek to prevent swarming.

The so-called 'Killer bees' (beloved of movie-makers) DO NOT OCCUR IN THE UK.

Q8. Is beekeeping for trade or business?

Of the 20,000 or so beekeepers in the UK only around 300 are professional. aAl of the remainder are hobbyists and utilise the products of the hive for personal use, typically these beekeepers have less than 10 hives. On an allotment site it would normally be inappropriate to keep large numbers of hives with two or three being a suggested number (this may increase during the summer with normal hive management). Beekeepers do give away or swap honey in the same way that allotment holders often give away or swap excess vegetables when this occurs.

Q9. Can a beekeeper’ competence be checked

To check that the beekeeper is competent request evidence that they have been assessed for the BBKA Basic Certificate.

The BBKA Basic Certificate is an indication that the beekeeper has been assessed for competence (like the driving test!) by a very experienced bee-keeper. Alternatively, ensure that he or she is supervised by a more experienced beekeeper.

Q10. Who is responsible for the bees?
The beekeeper will carry responsibility for the bees and any resulting problem that may occur. The beekeeper should have third-party liability insurance to cover any possible claim that may occur. Any beekeeper who is a member of the BBKA automatically has £5M of third-party cover. All such beekeepers have a membership card which can easily be verified.

Q11. How much space will beekeeping take?
Most beehives in use in the UK are les than 600mm (2ft square), some room is required around this for working. An area 2m by 3 m (6ft 6in by 10 ft) should be sufficient for two or three hives. This sort of space lends itself to small otherwise unusable spaces in corners of sites etc.

Q12. Can bees be kept safely on allotments?
Emphatically, the answer is yes. In 2008 the BBKA undertook a national survey of beekeepers that have bees on allotments, from the 250+ responses, two-thirds of allotment holders and managers allowed beekeeping and regarded it as a positive experience for the manager and the allotment holders. The same survey produce a number of suggestions as to how this could be made as safe as possible:

a) Be careful about placing hives. Bees have defined and precise flight paths, if these cross footpaths, use a screen to force the bees to fly above head height – you will not notice them, they will only drop down again to feed on flowers. Similarly, careful use of hedges and building can produce the same effect.

b) Screening the hives from direct view (e.g., by vegetation) helps to reduce the concerns on anyone looking into the allotment. Many requests to remove bees come from parties 'external' to the allotment (e.g. a new adjacent development) where often some education and information are a better response.

c) Use a corner of the allotment which will never be used for cultivation. This keeps bees and plot holders further apart – the demand for plots means that many more are being brought into use where possible. It may be possible to use a 'corner patch' to keep bees – the beekeepers do not need to be allotment holders in this case and can pay their rent with a honey tithe.

d) There are undoubtedly a small number of allotment locations where beekeeping is not appropriate. This should NOT be taken to include the general urban environment – bees do very well here, but a very small group of plots adjacent to a school, hospital or horse-riding establishment, for instance, should be considered carefully. The local beekeeping association will be able to give competent specific advice.

Much more information can be found at the BBKA web-site:

www.britishbee.org.uk

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