



Bees, Neighbours and Siting an Apiary

This leaflet is intended to provide guidance for the beginner who is looking for a good site for their first colonies. In general you will be quite inexperienced and it is suggested you make contact with your local BKA before buying bees or equipment.

They should give you the opportunity to handle bees under supervision on a number of occasions so you are competent and capable of handling a colony of bees on your own.

Every year there are a large number of people who buy bees and equipment without this preparation, then give up because they are unaware of the time needed, don't know what is required because they haven't had tuition or they simply don't like being stung. This often results in the bees being abandoned, causing problems that could so easily have been avoided.

A good and responsible local BKA will advise beginners when they are ready to keep their own bees, will give them advice on siting them and possibly make a visit.

Honey bees naturally live in trees several metres above the ground where they are dry and shaded from the sun. We usually keep them close to the ground, which introduces problems we should be aware of and try to avoid. Damp conditions and pests such as mice and green woodpeckers may need addressing.

Most beekeepers have less than five hives, often only two or three, and will probably want to keep them at home as a first choice. This is understandable as they can watch their bees at work, equipment is at hand and less time is lost in travelling, but houses have smaller gardens than in the past and this may cause problems for the family or close neighbours, so an alternative site may have to be found on someone else's property and this is termed an out-apiary. In choosing a site you need to take into account the bees' needs as well as your own.

If you are new to beekeeping you may not be aware of some of the issues involved in siting hives and it would make sense to seek sound advice from your local BKA. Very often there may be a problem that can be easily overcome by moving a hive a short distance, facing it in another direction or screening it.

Consideration for others

Everyone knows that bees sting and beekeepers must understand that some non-beekeepers don't understand insects and are frightened of them. Fear is often embedded in people's minds at an early age by over protective adults or films of such things as "killer bees". It is not always easy to reduce fear in others, although progress can often be made by inviting non-beekeepers to see inside a bee hive, but make sure they are fully protected and you do nothing to irritate the bees.

There are likely to be three main situations where non-beekeepers are involved; the first is immediate neighbours, the second is those who will be passing close to hives such as walkers or horse riders and the third is the beekeeper's own family. None of these should be ignored and with a bit of thought and common sense it is possible to site hives where they are unlikely to be a problem to anyone. The responsible beekeeper will keep normally good tempered bees and in a position where they are not a nuisance to anyone else.

Whatever the situation if you are thinking of keeping bees the first move should be to contact your local Beekeeping Association (BKA). Attend several meetings, learn to handle bees competently and be absolutely sure you can make the commitment needed before you have bees of your own.

Speak to your tutor and ask them for an honest opinion about whether you are ready to have your own bees and are able to care for them in a responsible manner. If you are progressing well this will give you a chance to speak to your family and neighbours and give them an idea you may like to keep bees at home.

Many people are aware of the value of bees and you may find they are supportive, but if you detect a negative response you may have to choose between the slight inconvenience of not having your bees at home or a deteriorating relationship with those around you. If they become alarmed about the presence of bee hives, their complaints can result in your bees being considered a nuisance whether they are or not. Even if neighbours are stung by a wasp, your bees may get the blame.

What are the problems likely to be?

Stings will clearly be the main concern most people have and it doesn't help when they are told there are 50,000 bees in a hive!

In general bees are only likely to be a problem close to their home, away from that, any sting is likely to be accidental. In normal circumstances bees will tolerate someone walking or working within a few metres of a hive without any problem.

Aggression in bees is usually caused by three things:-

- The bees themselves. If there is a problem this can be overcome quite easily.
- Bad handling. This can be for a number of reasons including poor use of smoke, clumsiness, roughness and not observing the attitude of the colony. The wearing of full protection will not alert the beekeeper to the temper of the colony or the number of angry bees in the air. The beekeeper may not be getting stung, but others could be.
- Occasional unfavourable weather conditions. This can happen during thundery weather and may be caused by a rapid drop in air pressure. It is best to avoid inspecting colonies in these conditions.

There is a possibility that a combination of more than one of the above will cause a problem.

Under normal circumstances there is no reason why bees should behave aggressively when handled well.

After lengthy confinement in the winter, bees' flights on warm days in early spring can result in anything in the vicinity of the hives being spotted with faeces. If this includes neighbours' washing or cars, then any resentment is understandable. There is very little that can be done to prevent this, and although little harm is done it is unlikely to improve relations that might already be somewhat strained.

At swarming time not only is a settling swarm likely to cause anxiety, but also if it subsequently decides to take up residence in a local building such as in a roof or chimney. In a built-up area it is very important to prevent swarming if possible.

Responsible beekeepers will strive to keep good tempered bees and cull bad tempered stock. They will be knowledgeable and make sure swarming is kept to a minimum.

Is my garden suitable?

It is difficult to give a simple answer because each situation is different, but it is probably worth being positive and investigating all the possibilities before rejecting it.

Ask an experienced beekeeper from your local BKA to have a look for you. Take their advice and if they are doubtful, then look for an alternative. In general there are few problems in rural areas, but much more care will be needed in built-up areas, although some situations can be improved with a little bit of common sense.

Considerations in your own garden:-

- Avoid placing hives near a boundary unless it is solid such as a wall, fence, building or hedge. This will force the bees to gain height quickly if the hive is facing the object.
- If room is limited enclose the hives on the remaining sides with something dense at least two metres high to make the bees gain height. This could be a wooden panel fence, fine plastic netting or a trellis with quick growing plants such as honeysuckle.
- If you only have a small area available decide the maximum number of hives you will keep at this site and stick to it, but remember that during the summer it is quite common to increase for a number of reasons.
- The larger the garden the more options you usually have and it may be better to site the bees somewhere like an orchard.

If your garden is small or your family and neighbours aren't keen on having bees near them there is no point in confrontation and you would be best advised to look for a site elsewhere.

Some alternatives

These will vary depending on your circumstances. In rural areas there are usually a number of possible sites within a short distance, varying from larger gardens and orchards to farms.

In built up areas there may be a number of different options including allotments and the opportunity to have communal sites, as many do. Your local BKA is probably used to this situation and may be able to help here.

Some things to consider

Whatever the situation you will need to consider the bees, non-beekeepers and yourself.

- In exposed areas, hives should be sheltered from strong winds so foragers can land easily at the entrance, and hive roofs are not blown off (a problem with WBCs).
- Leave enough space between hives so you can work them without being cramped – 1.2-1.5 metres is a reasonable minimum. Hives can be placed in pairs where space is limited.

- A hive does not have to face the morning sun as some sources suggest. What is more important is that it doesn't face in a direction that will cause a nuisance to others.
- The site needs to be dry and airy. Damp is not good for bees or the durability of equipment.
- Avoid frost pockets which may check spring development, or sun traps where the bees may struggle to ventilate the hive in the summer.
- Ground near streams and rivers could be damp or flood.
- Grassland that is dry in summer may become muddy in wet weather. Look at the vegetation as ground where things like sedges, rushes, moss and alder trees grow will be damp.
- Dense woodland should be avoided, especially if there is thick undergrowth and low branches, but open woodland is often good if there is little undergrowth, allowing free flowing air. This keeps the hives dry in the winter, cool in the summer and bees can fly out through the canopy without causing a nuisance.
- The area should be fenced from livestock which may knock hives over. You may need a gate to help with access.
- Bees need water to dilute honey stores for use in spring and to cool the hive in hot weather. In most areas there is a natural water source, but if not you may have to provide some.
- Vandalism and theft have always been a problem for beekeepers, although thankfully quite minor. Being friendly with neighbours encourages them to alert you to any problems.
- Marking hives by branding may deter some possible thefts.
- Clipping of queens will help you manage colonies better during the swarming season, especially if you are a little late with inspections.
- In case you need to be contacted, leave your telephone number on a "Dymo" label pinned to the outside of a hive roof in an out apiary.

Forage and bee density

Honey bees usually forage within one or two kilometres of their hive and up to about five kilometres for exceptionally rewarding food sources. We will only deal with permanent apiaries here, but some beekeepers may wish to move bees to crops such as oil seed rape or heather. This of course will affect access.

In general, virtually anywhere is suitable for the amateur beekeeper with a few colonies as it is rare that an area is so bad that bees can't obtain a reasonable food supply. Bees in towns and cities often do exceptionally well, providing the hive density is quite low, where many gardens will have a wide variety of nectar and pollen bearing plants, trees and shrubs.

In rural areas more colonies can be kept in one place. It is difficult to give numbers because it depends on several things such as the forage available and the prolificacy of bees that are kept. Prolific colonies need much more nectar and pollen than non-prolific bees, so fewer can be kept in one place. In general most rural areas will support at least 10-15 colonies in an apiary, possibly less in built-up areas. What should be remembered is that both nectar and pollen are important to a colony and there needs to be a good supply of both at all times.

Access

Convenient access will make your beekeeping much more enjoyable and not physically demanding or hazardous. Easy movement of equipment in and out of the apiary ensures your inspections will be frequent and productive.

If possible choose a level site and avoid areas with rabbit holes or tree roots as they can be dangerous when carrying heavy honey supers. Don't consider a site which entails climbing fences or crossing ditches. It is ideal to have vehicular access to the hives, but don't forget that somewhere that is easily accessible for you will also be the same for thieves and vandals.

Space

Take into account how you work your bees. If you work from the back of the hive you will probably put the supers to the side, but at the back if you work from the side. Make sure you allow enough space to work between the hives without the possibility of tripping over. Try to avoid such hazards as thorny bushes or barbed wire fences, as they can tear clothing and veils. They will be more of a problem if space is tight.

Make sure there is room for expansion and allow for at least 50% more colonies than you think you will have. During the summer colony numbers can fluctuate as a result of making up nuclei, taking in swarms or making artificial swarms.

Place the hives at a height that is comfortable for you to work without getting backache. Don't put them in a long line all facing the same way in an exposed position, otherwise drifting may occur in strong winds.

Consider making room for a bait hive to collect stray swarms.

Finding the site

Establishing good relations with neighbours, local farmers, land owners and the general public is a major factor in finding and maintaining a good apiary site. Talk to them about the value of bees as pollinators and educate them about the needs of bees. Try to capture their interest and co-operation, gaining respect for the bees and the beekeeper.

It is probably best to find a site, then ask permission from the owner or tenant, rather than simply ask if you can keep bees on their land. That way you have what suits you rather than what you are given. It may be you are refused the location you have asked about, but are offered somewhere else. Have a look at it, but only agree if it is reasonably satisfactory. This will avoid a lot of inconvenience if it is unsuitable and you have to move. Rent of a jar of honey per colony per year is normal in most areas.

An apiary that is hidden from view is less likely to be noticed. Avoid sites that border roads, footpaths and bridleways. Putting on a beesuit in full view of others may attract unwanted attention.

Very often non-beekeepers contact BKAs with offers of apiary sites and it may be worthwhile speaking to the secretary. There are times when a temporary site is needed, often at short notice, in which case convenience will probably be the main issue. This can be with another beekeeper, but always have somewhere readily available.

Maintaining a good relationship

In most instances there is no formal agreement with both parties working on a basis of trust. A formal agreement may tie you into something that may not suit you, so is probably best avoided. However, it should be explained that moving colonies, if necessary for whatever reason, cannot always be done immediately.

Having found a good site make sure you don't abuse it by leaving gates open, blocking access, leaving it untidy or letting your dog chase animals. Seek permission if you need to cut trees or trim hedges.

Communal site

The sharing of sites with other beekeepers can be advantageous as it allows help with lifting and learning. However, be aware that if you are insured through Bee Diseases Insurance (BDI) all colonies on a communal site must be insured otherwise any claims will be rejected.

You would be well advised to make sure the other beekeepers are responsible, make regular inspections and are competent. They should check their colonies regularly for foul brood and monitor and treat for varroa.

Register on BeeBase

<https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/index.cfm>. There are several benefits including notification if foul brood has been found in the area.

Try to reduce protective equipment as soon as you can. Thick gloves will make you clumsy which may annoy bees. Thin gloves will give you much more "feel" and will be much easier to use. Full beesuits may give a message to those who are not keen on bees that if you have to dress up like that the bees must be bad tempered. A tunic looks much more acceptable and will give you similar protection.

General points:

This leaflet is one of a series intended to help beekeepers and non-beekeepers. If you believe the contents of this leaflet are relevant to you, please seek further advice from an experienced beekeeper or your tutor.

Information is updated regularly – please check with the BBKA web site at: www.bbka.org.uk – for the latest information.

This leaflet replaces BI "Bees and Neighbours" and BI I "Choosing an Apiary site"

Note: The same information is published in our printed leaflet L011 available from the BBKA.

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