

BEE A GOOD NEIGHBOR!

Beekeepers should strive to avoid neighborhood and community conflict by implementing beekeeping practices that help to prevent honey bees from becoming a real (or imagined) threat to others.

The following are suggested practices for bee-ing a good neighbor when keeping honey bees. In order to "keep" honey bees you must be able to get to them. Place your hives in a location where you have easy year round access. If you can not get to your bees, small issues can become big problems, leading to neighbor conflict and/or unhealthy bees. Remember that you will (hopefully) be harvesting honey, which is heavy, as well as lugging containers of food and other supplies to the bees, so easy access to your hives is important.

Before you decide on a location to place your hives, find out if there are animals such as livestock, horses, domestic pets, or animals that are chained up and in close proximity to where you want to place the beehives. Honey bees do not usually bother other animals, but chained up animals can not escape if they are frightened, harassed, or attacked by the bees. Either place the hives in a different location or arrange to unchain the animal(s). For areas with heavy foot traffic, place something a few feet in front of the hives (tall bushes, fencing, statue...) to direct the bee line up and over where the people walk. A small fence surrounding the bee hives is also a good way to keep people a safe distance from the bee hives. Placing signs around the apiary alert people that there are honey bees in the vicinity and to stay away from the area is always a good idea. Safety first is bee-ing a good neighbor.

Four or fewer colonies of honey bees are recommended for each one-quarter acre of land. Too many honey bee colonies in one area could cause each colony to not have adequate forage. Check the surrounding area and find out what will be available for the honey bees to forage upon, and plan accordingly. Place the hives ten feet or more from the lot line. If your set back is more than ten feet, use the set back distance whenever possible. Face the entrance of the hive away from the lot line. If the hive is within 10 feet from the lot-line and must face the lot line, place something tall (fence, tall bushes, a statue) a few feet in front of the hive so as to direct the beeline up, rather than out. Good neighbors mind their bee-lines!

Try to place hives in an inconspicuous area, or screen them with a fence or bushes. (Out of sight out of mind!) Screening can also act as a wind break, which is helpful for cold wind and wind blown rain. Keep in mind that a wind break is not adequate defense against very heavy winds, falling trees, or animals knocking a hive over. For this reason, strap each colony with a ratchet strap to hold it together in case it gets tipped over. Use two straps for added safety. Imagine the buzz that a tipped over colony of honey bees could cause in the neighborhood?!

Placing the hives in a location most suitable to honey bees will help keep them happy and healthy. Wet bees are dead bees, so be sure to choose a dry area on your property to place your hives. Also, do not place your hives in a low lying area of your property. Water can collect there and harm honey bees. It is often colder and damper in low lying areas, and you may have to move them in case of flooding, so it's best to avoid low lying areas.

A wind block is a good idea, especially in especially very windy areas or to help alleviate wind blown rain and cold winter wind. Also, try to put the hives in a location where they will receive early morning sun and late day shade. The early morning sun gets the bees up and out to work early, while the late day shade is mainly for the beekeeper. Afternoon shade makes working your hives on a hot summer day easier and more enjoyable, but full sun tends to be better for the bees in terms of pests, disease, and increased honey production. Depending on what part of the country you live in, you may not have the option (or need) for shade.

Colony health is important not only to the honey bees you manage, but to other honey bees in the neighborhood. Be a good neighbor to other colonies in your community by keeping your honey bees free of pests and disease. Pests and pathogens can spread to other colonies, making fellow beekeepers and neighboring colonies unhappy and unhealthy. Check colony health regularly for signs of pests, disease, and treat accordingly. Do not leave old comb or other hive products outside. These items can draw in pests or other honey bees, and instigate robbing, which could kill the attacked colony or cause them to become defensive. Mind your beeswax and keep a tidy apiary.

Open the hive to inspect the colony on warm, sunny days, when most foragers are out foraging! Try to avoid inspections in the early morning, late afternoon, during cold weather (below 65° F), in rain, or overcast conditions, as more honey bees are in the hive at these times, and they can also be more defensive at these times. Make sure you have all the equipment you need before you open the hive. This makes inspections faster and more efficient, and with less open time. This can minimize stress on the colony, and your neighbors!

Before you begin your inspection, take a peek over to the neighbor's yard to make sure they are not outside, or hosting a party. If the neighbors are hosting a party or are out doing yard work, decide if the colony can wait for an inspection, or if you must open the hive immediately. Choosing another time to inspect the colony may be better than risking bothering the neighbors. Remember, your idea of honey bees "bothering" people may be very different than what your neighbor, or one of their friends or family perceives as bothering. A little courtesy goes long way to bee-ing a good neighbor.

Honey bees need water for many hive activities, including cooling the hive and diluting honey for consumption by the bees. In the summer, a colony can consume about a gallon of water per hive, per day. If water isn't readily available, they will find it. Sometimes a neighbor's birdbath, swimming pool, or even a garden hose can become a water source for bees, which can make some people upset. In order to alleviate this, make sure all hives in your apiary have a constant supply of water.

You can put out a few shallow containers with some rocks and shells in the bottom, and with beeswax or corks floating on top. One drop of vanilla extract can help the bees find the water. Once they do, they will keep going back to the same spot. For this reason, leave the water in one spot and refill it often. The bees will collect water from the sources you provide rather than the neighbors kiddie-pool or garden hose and will be good neighbors!

After extracting honey, the practice of placing wet supers outside for bees to clean may help the bees who clean them up, but it could interfere with neighboring or weak colonies, and cause them to become defensive. They can get robbed or even killed! Also, neighbors can become alarmed by lots of bee activity. Instead, place wet supers inside your hive(s) for a day or so, and let the bees clean it out in the comfort of their own hive. Simply place the wet super(s) on top of the hive and add inner/outer covers as usual. Be sure to remove these cleaned out supers after a few days unless you are in a strong nectar flow. After the supers are clean and dry, you can easily store them for future nectar flows. By placing wet supers inside your colonies rather than in the open, weaker colonies are spared robbing, honey bees don't exhibit defensive behavior and neighbors will not get upset about increased honey bee activity.

Advance planning is very good beekeeping practice. Stay ahead of colony growth and by looking for swarm indicators during inspections, especially in the spring. But remember, honey bees can swarm at almost any time of the year. A bee's goal in life is not to make more bees, or tons of honey, it is to make more colonies. Bees do this by swarming, which is instinctual, but manageable. A swarm is a colony giving birth to a new honeybee colony. As beautiful as this is, it can be alarming to those who do not know about swarms or honeybees in general.

Practice swarm prevention as a way to help alleviate any conflict that a honeybee swarm may cause. Preventing swarms also keeps the bees you manage in your apiary, and alive! In many states it is legal to kill honey bee swarms. Most swarms do not make it on their own due to extermination by humans, not locating a suitable home, lack of forage, or winter kill. Save the bees and avoid neighbor conflict by practicing anti-swarm management techniques. Always put a bait hive in every one of your apiaries in order to catch your own swarms, or someone else's, before they become a problem. Place bait boxes throughout your community to catch even more swarms and help avoid community conflict.

A little crowding in the brood nest is fine, but an overly congested brood nest is not. Add honey supers if they seem crowded, or when 6-7 frames in the upper most box are drawn and covered in bees. If the brood nest is overly congested, backfilled with nectar, or has swarm cells, you can use the Demaree method of swarm control, split the colony, or add drawn comb or foundation in the brood nest and add more room above the brood nest. Be a good neighbor and keep your bees from swarming.

Some colonies can be split for desirable genetic traits such as gentleness, good honey yield, a prolific queen, and local adaptation, rather than just for swarm control. In addition, if you find the temperament of a colony to be overly defensive, you should requeen to introduce a more gentle variety of honeybee. Gentle bees keep neighbors happy!

And last, to sweeten the deal, give some honey or other products of the hive to your neighbors! Not only does this make them smile, but you can explain some of your beekeeping activities and answer any questions they have about honey bees and beekeeping. You never know, they may become a beekeeper one day. I believe we should have thousands of people with a few beehives each, rather than a few people with thousands of beehives. This helps spread the love of honey bees and beekeeping as well as the ecological servicing that they provide.

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