

# VERMONT AGENCY OF AGRICULTURE

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PLANT INDUSTRY DIVISION

## *TIPS ON LOCATING COLONIES*

(AND KEEPING THE NEIGHBORS HAPPY)

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Now that you have decided to acquire your first colony of bees, the next question is - where do I put it? There are many factors to consider when making that decision.

Keeping bees successfully in any location requires an intimate understanding of basic bee biology, common sense and often, human psychology. It is possible to keep bees in crowded suburban areas, on tiny city lots, in large or small towns, and of course in rural areas. Beekeepers in areas with close-by neighbors (city or rural) need to manage their bees so that they are not, or will not become a nuisance. By understanding the conditions and circumstances under which bees may become a problem, we can take steps to alleviate many problems before they arise.

### ***BEE FLIGHT PATTERNS***

Bees flying from their hives will fly 3-6 feet above the ground. This may make them an annoyance to people who might be passing by. Planting a tall hedge or erecting a solid fence at least six feet high, will force the bees to fly above head level.

Fences and hedges also provide seclusion, which is very important. Keeping hives out of sight helps protect them from vandalism and theft. However, this is not the only factor involved. Bees out of sight are less often objects of worry and controversy. To a beekeeper, a row of well kept hives generates a feeling of calm and serenity; to a non-beekeeper, they may symbolize a threat or be a discomfort. So, "**out of sight, out of mind**" will keep both beekeeper and their neighbors in a better frame of mind.

### ***LOCATION***

Bees should be placed in an area so that they are "comfortable" with their hive as well as the physical location of the hive. An ideal location is where they are in full or partial sun all day. Bees placed in the shade tend to be more aggressive. Face hive entrances so that they face a southerly direction. Avoid low areas that are frost pockets or may accumulate water. Wind protection, especially from the winter winds out of the north and west is very beneficial. Locate your hives so that you can get to them easily. This is especially important during honey harvest. Avoid having to carry equipment long distances to and from hives. Hives should be dry and the bottom boards should slope slightly forward so that rain water can run out the front. Hive stands help elevate the bees off the ground. This allows air to circulate under the hives, and makes it less likely that weeds or grass will block the entrance. Raising the hives off the ground will prolong equipment life, and save your back!

## ***WATER***

Bees need water to cool the hive and to dilute honey for feeding their young. Bees generally collect water from the nearest source, although they prefer standing water that is warm, has some organic material and is located in very shallow pools. Bees collecting water from swimming pools, bird baths, pet and livestock waterers, or the neighbors water faucet could quickly become a nuisance. Neighbors could get stung or they might avoid using an area where the bees are because they are afraid of them. The aesthetics of having a number of dead bees floating around in a pool leaves something to be desired. **Once bees start using a particular water source, it is very difficult to keep them from returning to it.** The solution lies in providing a constant supply of water close to the hives as soon as the bees start flying in the spring.

## ***"YELLOW RAIN"***

Another problem that can arise, in the spring especially, is fecal spotting on nearby objects, such as vehicles, houses and clothes on clothes lines. When the bees come out of winter, they have an accumulation of fecal matter in their bodies, which they void on flights during the spring. Sometimes it seems that they intentionally "bomb" objects with this material. In any event, the resulting deposit is unpleasant, can stain, and is often difficult to remove, once dried. The best remedy is to place hives well away from high use areas. A blocking row of trees or shrubs also helps the situation.

## ***STINGING BEES***

Angry bees are attracted to movement, animal odors, and vibrations. Opening a hive while your next-door neighbor is mowing their lawn is definitely a good way to get them stung. In general, do not manipulate hives when anyone in the immediate area is likely to be outside.

Bee colonies, like people, vary in temperament. Generally, if there is a mean hive, replacing the queen will alleviate the problem. A beekeeper should never keep a hive of aggressive bees near houses, where people will pass close by, or near livestock. Sometimes the progeny from an individual queen will vary widely in disposition. As a queen uses up the sperm of one of the approximately 9-15 drones she has mated with, she begins using the sperm of another, at which point her daughters effectively have a new father. As a consequence, a gentle hive may become mean even though it still has the same queen.

## ***KEEPING CONTROL***

Whenever a bee hive is opened, the beekeeper must keep it under control at all times. A typical bee hive contains thousands of workers all capable of stinging. The bees have an elaborate and organized system of defense. If we chose to ignore this system, the consequences could be dire. A beekeeper in a remote area may bundle up and take a number of stings and ignore them. This is not an option if you have neighbors close by. Smoke is the most important tool for anyone opening a hive. Smoke should be used in moderation; however, the smoker should be capable of producing large volumes of smoke on short notice. The beekeeper should smoke the entrance, smoke under the lid, and

periodically smoke the frames while the hive is open. Jarring the hive or frames may anger the bees so the beekeeper should work carefully and without haste. Keep the frames freely movable by going through the brood chamber several times a year. Using nine frames will make it easier to remove the first frame during an inspection. Any burr comb should be removed and collected in a bee proof container.

## ***PUBLIC RELATIONS***

If one is on speaking terms with his or her neighbors, that friendship may be encouraged by giving them some honey during the Holidays. It's amazing how interested and cooperative people become when presented with an occasional jar of honey. Show them the difference between wasps and bees and they will be less likely to blame your bees for every sting. Be careful and tactful - befriending a neighbor is a lot easier than calming them once they have become angry with you and your bees.

## ***WHEN TO INSPECT COLONIES***

The bee's sting is primarily for defense of the colony. Whenever a colony is opened or otherwise disturbed, it is potentially in its most dangerous state. Only when the hive itself is disturbed will the bees attack in any numbers.

During a nectar flow, many of the older workers will be in the field foraging. This is the best time to examine the colony. During the summer, especially between honey flows, more bees will be in the hive and the situation can change. During such a time of dearth, there will inevitably be some robbing going on which will make the bees even more defensive of any intrusion into their colony. Leaving cappings or honey exposed, or leaving a colony open for more than a few minutes may precipitate a robbing situation which can lead to thousands of angry bees in the air. Any hive that is weak should have its entrance reduced; otherwise other stronger hives may attempt to rob from it. While there is a honey flow in progress, robbing is much less likely to occur.

Weather and time of day also have an influence on the disposition of a bee colony. Examining bees early in the morning, late in the afternoon, during cold weather (below 60 degrees), in rain or when the sky is overcast may make the bees angry and more likely to sting. To minimize problems, the hives should be attended to only on warm sunny days, preferably in the middle of the day. This may vary according to other factors including the types of flowers that the bees are working. Many flowers produce most of their nectar only during part of each day and unless there are alternate sources, the bees will have nothing to do the rest of the day. The beekeeper should understand the subtleties of flows and be observant enough to determine when the bees are bringing in nectar. An obvious indicator would be heavy flight activity at the hive entrance.

## ***IN SUMMARY***

A successful bee hobbyist's bee colonies do not interfere with or bother the neighbors.

Evaluate every hive manipulation and the natural biology of honey bees with your neighbors foremost in mind. **Your objective should be to insure that your neighbors have no reason to complain.** In most instances where neighbors complain, bee colonies must be relocated.

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#### ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Sanford, Malcolm, T., 1982. *Beekeeper Rights*. Hum of the Hive. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Gainesville, Florida.

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Carole, L. 1989. *A Model City Beekeeping Ordinance Developed for Texas by the Texas Beekeepers Association*. American Bee Journal 129(12): 793-6.

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For additional information and some hands-on experience, visit a workshop conducted by the Vermont Beekeepers Association. For a list of dates, times, and locations, please visit the association's website at: [www.vtbeekeepers.org](http://www.vtbeekeepers.org).

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If you have any questions about bees or beekeeping in Vermont, contact the State Apiculturist at 802-828-2431; [steve.parise@state.vt.us](mailto:steve.parise@state.vt.us) [www.vermontagriculture.com](http://www.vermontagriculture.com)

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