



The buzzy life of a beekeeper and her bees

Sophie Butcher is chair of the Wiltshire Beekeepers Association, becoming a beekeeper was not entirely her decision but as she explains, it is a truly rewarding pastime.

ONE OF the shared fears new beekeepers have is of being stung. Bees are placid creatures on the whole and when you get stung it is usually your fault.

My life as a beekeeper started in a fairly unusual way. We had just moved to Chippenham and were unpacking crates on the first day in our new house. Half way through the morning, my 80-year-old mother drove up from London to have lunch, the way mothers do when everything

is totally chaotic already. Only she turned up with a hive of bees on her back seat.

"Darling," she said enthusiastically, "now that you're all moved in, I've decided that you are going to keep bees." And so I became a beekeeper.

While my mother has kept bees for years, I had never really paid them much attention. Now I was being thrown in at the deep end. It was October, my mother wanted me to stop unpacking crates to cook her lunch, and I had to decide where I was going to put this hive full of bees.

We walked around the garden and found a reasonably suitable place. I located a couple of breeze blocks to act as a stand, we set the hive on top and my mother stood back while I bent to open the entrance. Of course the bees flew out in a rush, they got in my hair and I ran about like a mad person trying to get them out, terrified of being stung. Maybe not the best introduction to beekeeping.

Keep calm and bee happy

These days bee suits are well made and protect you from stings. I wear one when I open a hive, although I usually handle my bees with

Below: Honey bee on lavender; feasting on Angelica nectar and covered in mallow pollen.





INDOORS AND OUTDOORS

bare hands. Because I do not wear gloves, I consciously handle them more gently than I otherwise might, and in turn my bees are correspondingly calmer.

I have kept bees for seven years. Even so, you will still see me running back to the shed occasionally, slapping my head as I go. This is because I will flip the hood of my bee suit over my head, but because I am relaxed with them, sometimes I forget to do up the zip. Inevitably bees get in, crawl on my face and when they get into my hair, they buzz anxiously. I panic. I cannot stop myself. And so begins a cycle with the bees stinging me as they panic at my reaction, and so my panic mounts.

I slap my head to squish the bees against my head to kill them before they can sting me (sorry bees). Luckily, bees do not fly into the dark, so once inside the shed with the door closed behind me, I can take off my hood and let the rest out. My husband just rolls his eyes when I come in with a puffy face. You would think I would learn about doing up zips.

Being stung is part and parcel of being a beekeeper, although, as a rule, bees do not sting me. They are fascinating creatures, and you will often find me standing beside my hives watching them returning with their loads of pollen and nectar. I am perfectly happy doing this without wearing a bee suit, I only wear one when I open up the hive. When I am stung, it is invariably my fault.

Self sufficient bees

So what is it like to keep honey bees? It is not like keeping a dog or a cat. Bees do not require daily care – you can go off on holiday without having to put them into kennels. Some of my time is spent cleaning kit and making up wooden frames for them to store honey in. I also spend many happy hours making candles from the old comb I melt down. And during the summer, I spend only a couple of hours at the weekend actually opening up my hives to check them.

On the whole, honey bees are quite content to get on with things all by themselves. The only reasons to check them are for disease and pests (twice a year), to make sure they have enough food (in long periods of inclement weather they can starve to death because they cannot forage), and to make sure they have plenty of space. One of the main reasons honey bees swarm is because they have run out of space for either the queen to lay or the workers to store honey.

Bees store most of their honey in a box called a super. When I open the colony up in summer, the sweet smell of honey emanating from these is fabulous. A quick glance inside each box will tell me if they have enough space to store more honey, and whether the full frames have yet been sealed with a wax capping.

Clockwise: The supers can be stacked quite high; bees being born biting their way out of wax capping; frame with honey ready to be extracted; a frame of the sealed brood.





Honey is surprisingly heavy

Below the super is a queen excluder which prevents the queen laying eggs in frames from which I will be harvesting honey. In the summer, the bees will bring in lots of nectar but do not necessarily prioritise capping the ripened honey with wax (they might not get around to capping it until the nectar flow is over). I cannot harvest it until it is capped, which makes my life difficult.

Have you ever tried lifting an awkward box full of bees (weighing up to 20 kilos) off a stack that is head height? I may have to lift three supers to get to the brood box at the bottom (that is the way bees work in nature – larvae at the bottom, honey stores above). It is heavy work; if you keep bees as a couple, it is obviously much easier.

Having removed all the supers, I get to check inside the brood box, which is kept at the bottom of the stack. The nest is shaped roughly like a rugby ball with slices (frames) through it. I will usually come across the queen trudging across a frame – and she definitely trudges.

She will lay around 1,500 eggs a day in summer (that is about her own weight in eggs every day). This takes some feeding and she is fed round the clock by her court – young bees whose sole job is to ensure she receives a near constant supply of royal jelly.

Her daughters collectively run the hive and her sons lounge about all day, just eating

and occasionally flying off to what is called a drone congregation area in the hope of finding a virgin queen to mate with. Their life is not one of ease, however. They die on mating, and in the autumn, their sisters regard them as a waste of rations and herd them out of the hive, where they die of cold.

The hard life of a bee

Mind you, the girls do not fare much better. They do all the work in the hive, apart from laying. They live about six weeks as adults. As house bees during the first three, they keep the hive spotless, dragging out all the rubbish and flying off with it to dump it away from the hive. They feed the brood, process the honey, and cool or heat the hive depending on the weather. They do this either by fanning their wings to collectively move currents of air through the hive (the ultimate aircon), or shivering their wing muscles to produce heat in a cluster around the brood.

When they are 10 days old they can make wax and so can build comb. This is expensive for them: it takes about eight pounds of honey to make one pound of wax.

Eventually, at three weeks old, they become foragers and fly off in search of nectar and pollen. Then after three weeks of foraging, if they have not been eaten by a bird, or been squashed on a car window, or killed by insecticide, they die of old age.

Angela Barlow and Pippa Gillham running the honey stand at the Wiltshire Bee & Honey Day.

To make one pot of honey, bees will have flown about 55,000 miles (that is just over two times around the world). Meanwhile, in her whole lifetime, the average honey bee will store one twelfth of a teaspoon of honey. A colony, which comprises up to 60,000 bees at the height of summer, naturally stores two to three times more honey than is usually needed to see them through the winter. It is an impressive collective effort and beekeepers harvest the excess.

The sweet taste of honey

Harvesting takes place in late July, leaving the bees plenty of time (August to October) to bring in the supplies they need for overwintering. Harvesting is another story. It can be a very sticky, messy process if you are not organised, and requires a lot of elbow grease if you do not have an electric spinner, but the result is so worth it. The bottled jars of honey are as delicious as they look. WL

Bee & Honey Day

If you would like to learn more about bees and beekeeping, the Wiltshire Bee & Honey Day takes place this year on October 9 at the Corn Exchange, Devizes.
• www.wiltshirebeekeepers.co.uk