TEN TIPS FOR SUBURBAN BEEKEEPING HOBBYISTS

While bee books contain much useful information, they do not spell out how to keep bees in a city or suburban environment. It is the purpose of this sheet to offer a few brief suggestions.

1. If you want to keep bees, you must take care of them so that they do not bother your neighbors. If the neighbors complain to the police, and the complaints are justified, you will shortly find that you will have to get rid of your bees. Mean bees can be cured by purchasing a new queen to replace the old one. The entire colony should become gentle within about a month. A good plan for maintaining gentle stock is to re-queen each colony every spring. Randomly mated queens are generally not as good as hybrids purchased from a queen breeder.

2. Swarm control is a more difficult problem to solve. Provide sufficient room not only for brood and honey, but also for the worker bees when weather does not permit flight. This may require 4-5 deep (9½") hive bodies for strong colonies (10-20 lbs. of bees). There are other suggestions for reducing swarming, but this is the most effective method known to date.

3. Select a size of hive bodies (supers) that is effective and relatively easy to handle. Three medium hive bodies (6 5/8" deep) are as good, or better, than two deeps (9½") for holding the queen and brood during the summer and the cluster of bees and honey stores during the winter. Many beekeepers also place 9 frames in a 10-frame super for easier manipulation of surplus honey stores. This is most conveniently done by using notched metal spacers on the frame supports. Note that figure 1 in PNW Bulletin 79 just indicates the various parts of a beehive. It will often be necessary to add the equivalent of 2-4 deep supers for surplus honey storage above the 2 deeps used for the brood chamber.

4. Careful spring management will reduce swarming problems. January - remove combination winter entrance-mouse guards and scrape out dead bees with a stick or hacksaw blade. Lift hive from rear to see that it is heavy, with plenty of honey stores. Repeat these operations in February and March. April - queen should be laying again and workers probably should have taken cleansing flights. Remove winter entrances for the season and feed the colonies, if they need it. May - on a warm day, pry the hive bodies apart, clean off the bottom board, and reverse the boxes by placing the upper unit on the bottom and the lower unit on top of it. If you used 3 medium hive bodies for wintering, interchange the top and bottom units. Feed medicated syrup or sugar for prevention of brood diseases. Three weeks later - reverse the hive bodies again, check brood pattern to see that the queen is laying all right, and
add a deep honey super (or equivalent in smaller supers). If you don't have drawn combs for the super, take one or two frames from each side of the brood nest and interchange with undrawn frames in the center of the super being added. Continue - every 2-3 weeks add a super until you have five 9½" hive bodies or equivalent.

5. Avoid using queen excluders, if possible. Bees do not like them and are much more likely to swarm.

6. Don't place your hives in the shade. Bee colonies should be located where there is good air circulation and open space to catch the morning sunlight. Nectar flow may be almost over by the time bees in the shade become active, especially in western Washington.

7. To prepare extracted honey, get together with 3-4 other back-letters to chip in and buy a small extractor. You will be able to extract all the honey you will ever get from 10 colonies during one weekend. Comb honey can be most easily produced in shallow frames (5 3/8" deep) with thin beeswax foundation. The honey is simply removed in suitably sized chunks.

8. Beekeeping is an art which cannot be entirely learned from textbooks. Join a local bee club and find an experienced beekeeper to go to for advice. Visit your County Extension Agent for useful information and available printed material. Buy either "The Hive and the Honey Bee" or "ABC and XYZ of Bee Culture," the two finest bee books in the English language.

9. Register your bees, not only because state laws require registration, but also because you need the bee inspector's advice on how to recognize and control diseases affecting bees.

10. Obtain extra equipment and give your name to the local police, fire department, and bee club, so that you will be called to catch swarms. You will benefit by obtaining near perfect combs from a properly fed swarm, but more important, you will help prevent restrictive ordinances against beekeeping.

Don't try to teach your bees anything they can't learn--learn their wants and needs. In this way, you will enjoy your hobby, produce honey, and obtain good pollination of home garden fruits and vegetables.

Carl A. Johansen, Professor of Entomology, and James T. Pennell, Extension Entomology Specialist, with the help of P. F. Thurber, Puget Sound Beekeepers Association.

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Use pesticides with care. Read the label on the container and follow the directions carefully.

Never smoke while applying insecticides and avoid breathing the spray or dust. Wear natural rubber gloves when handling pesticides. Wash hands and face carefully with soap and water after applying. If insecticides are spilled on the skin or clothing, remove contaminated clothing and wash exposed skin areas thoroughly.

Always store pesticides in their original containers, never in fruit jars or soft drink bottles, and be sure that labels remain on the original containers. Keep containers away from food or animal feed and out of the reach of children or irresponsible persons.