

10 Things You Can Do To Help Save The Bees

Bees are in trouble, and it is mostly because of us. We have destroyed much of their natural habitat, we have poisoned their food and in the case of honeybees, we have used and abused them for our own purposes while not giving enough attention to their needs and welfare.

Honeybees have been evolving for a very long time - the fossil record goes back at least 100 million years - and they became remarkably successful due to their adaptability to different climates, varied flora and their tolerance of many shapes and sizes of living accommodation. They became attractive to humans because of their unique ability to produce useful things, apparently out of thin air: honey, wax and propolis.

Until the nineteenth century, they were kept in pots, skeps, baskets and a variety of wooden boxes intended more-or-less to imitate their natural habitat of choice, the hollow tree. With the invention of the 'movable frame' hive, the second half of that century saw an exponential growth in commercial-scale beekeeping, and by the time motor vehicles became widely available, beekeeping on a widespread and industrial scale became a practical possibility.

Since then, bees have been treated in rather the same way as battery hens: routinely dosed with antibiotics and miticides in an effort to keep them producing, despite the growing problems of diseases and parasites and insecticide-treated plants that have led to the emergence of so-called 'Colony Collapse Disorder', especially in the massive bee-farming operations in the USA.

It doesn't have to be like this. Some beekeepers have realized that, if bees are to become healthy enough to develop resistance to disease and the ability to adapt to pests, then they have to be treated differently - and not just by beekeepers.

Here are some things you can do to help the bees:

1. Stop using insecticides - especially for 'cosmetic' gardening.

There are better ways of dealing with pests - especially biological controls. Modern pesticides are extremely powerful and many are long-lasting and very toxic to bees and other insects. *Removing all unnecessary pesticides from the environment is probably the single most important thing we can do to help save the bees.*

2. Avoid seeds coated with systemic insecticides.

Beware - many farm seeds are now coated with Clothianidin and related systemic insecticides, which cause the entire plant to become toxic to bees and all other insects that may feed on it. The same coatings may soon appear on garden seeds. Check your seed packets carefully - and if in doubt, ask the manufacturer for full information.

3. Read the labels on garden compost - beware hidden killers!

Some garden and potting composts are on sale that contain Imidacloprid - a deadly insecticide manufactured by Bayer. It is often disguised as 'vine weevil protection' or similar, but it is highly toxic to all insects and all soil life, including beneficial

earthworms. The insecticide is taken up by plants, and if you use this compost in hanging baskets, bees seeking water from the moist compost may be killed.

4. Create natural habitat.

If you have space in your garden, let some of it go wild to create a safe haven for bees and other insects and small mammals. Gardens that are too tidy are not so wildlife-friendly.

5. Plant bee-friendly flowers.

You can buy wildflower seeds from many seed merchants, and they can be sown in any spare patch of ground - even on waste ground that is not being cultivated. Some 'guerilla gardeners' even plant them in public parks and waste ground.

6. Provide a site for beehives.

If you have some space to spare, you could offer a corner of your garden to a local beekeeper as a place to keep a hive or two. They will need to have regular access, so bear this in mind when considering a site.

7. Make a wild bee house.

Providing a simple box as a place for feral bees to set up home is one step short of taking up beekeeping, but may appeal to those who want to have bees around but don't want to get involved with looking after them. Ideas for such boxes will be available at www.friendsofthebees.org

8. Support your local beekeepers.

Many people believe that local honey can help to reduce the effects of hayfever and similar allergies, which is one good reason to buy honey from a local beekeeper rather than from supermarkets, most of which source honey from thousands of miles away. If you can, find a beekeeper who does not use any chemicals in their hives and ask for pure comb honey for a real treat.

9. Learn about bees - and tell others.

Bees are fascinating creatures that relatively few people take the trouble to understand. Read a good book about bees and beekeeping, and who knows - you might decide to -

10. Become a beekeeper.

It is easier than you might imagine to become a beekeeper - and you don't need any of the expensive equipment in the glossy catalogues! Everything you need to keep bees successfully can be made by anyone with a few simple tools: if you can put up a shelf, you can probably build a beehive! For details, see <http://www.biobees.com>

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Phil Chandler is author of *The Barefoot Beekeeper* and has a busy discussion forum for natural beekeeping on his web site at <http://www.biobees.com>

A new charity - Friends of the Bees - has been created to raise awareness of the bees' health problems and to promote more natural methods of beekeeping. See their web site at www.FriendsOfTheBees.org