

The Bees Next Door

By Amanda Goble

Is it safe to keep honey bees in a neighborhood?

In recent years, there has been a surge of enthusiasm for outdoor hobbies. This wonderful trend has reconnected many of us to the land, creating fulfilling pastimes and a means of producing healthful and local foods and other products. Residents of many neighborhoods have lovely gardens or a small flock of egg-laying chickens. But honey bees? Are beehives safe, and should you worry if your neighbor intends to start beekeeping?

Honey bees are actually among the most neighborly backyard animals, and for this reason most counties and towns do not prohibit the hobby. Hives are small, unobtrusive, often nicely painted, and tucked alongside an attractive fence. Bees make no loud noises, and they never smell. Beekeepers keep their bees for delicious honey, useful beeswax—and simply to enjoy them. But unlike other animals that only benefit their owner, honey bees pollinate plants far and wide. If you garden, you will reap a benefit from local bees in the form of increased yields and better quality produce.

But this very trait—the honey bees' ability to leave their hive and fly around—is what worries people most when they think about playing neighbor to a beekeeper and his or her hives. Bees can sting. Do they pose a safety hazard?

Fear not. While honey bees *can* sting, they don't do so very often. They are docile and gentle animals that only sting if they are directly harmed (such as being stepped on), or if their hive is threatened. Stinging a person is fatal to honey bees, so these peaceful ladies much prefer to keep their stings to themselves. Most "bee stings" aren't inflicted by honey bees at all, but rather by wasps or yellow jackets, and most beekeepers take pride in the mild nature of their bees. In fact, honey bees are so quiet and inoffensive that beekeepers regularly check on their hives and handle the bees bare-handed and aren't stung—so simply having beehives in your neighborhood is not likely to pose any hazard to you, your family or your pets. Because beekeepers usually place their beehives behind privacy fences or along buildings, screening them from view, you probably won't notice the bees at all.

You may have heard horror stories—or watched horror films—about *swarms* of bees. If one of your neighbors acquires bees, is there a risk from swarms?

Once again, there is no reason to fear. A swarm is rare and is nothing like the movies. It is simply a group of bees that has left their hive and is searching for a new place to live. They are even more gentle than an established hive of bees because they have no honey or young to defend, and they don't pay much attention to humans. If you have a beekeeper in your neighborhood, he or she already takes steps to ensure that the bees don't swarm. But in the unlikely event that a swarm comes to rest on one of your trees, your local beekeepers will be happy to come to your place and remove the bees safely and humanely.

If you don't need to worry about stings and swarms, what *do* you need to worry about if someone nearby keeps bees?

- You might need to worry about how to deal with an extra-large harvest when those bees begin pollinating your garden free of charge.
- You may also need to worry about your friends and relatives hounding you for your recipes after they taste the dishes made from your extra-nice fruits and vegetables.
- You might need to worry about developing a serious craving for honey. Neighborly beekeepers often give away a jar or two of honey from their harvest, and there is no comparison between fresh local honey and the kind you can get off the shelf at the store.
- You might also need to worry about dozing off on your front porch on a summer day because of the gentle hum of the bees among the flowers.
- You might even need to worry about developing your own interest in beekeeping, a productive and therapeutic hobby that anyone can enjoy.

But those are worries that most of us won't mind very much.

If you have an interest in pollinators, honey or beekeeping, consider joining the Crystal Coast Beekeepers Association (CCBA), Carteret County's beekeeping organization. The CCBA welcomes everyone and aims to provide help to fellow beekeepers, instruction and mentoring, and education for the community. CCBA meets the second Monday of every month at the Morehead City Parks and Recreation Department. The next meeting will be Monday, March 11, at 7 p.m. All are welcome; come see what the buzz is about.

Amanda Goble is a North Carolina Certified Beekeeper and active member of the Crystal Coast Beekeeping Association and Eastern Apicultural Society. She keeps backyard bees for fresh local honey, natural beeswax, and the joy of caring for a large family of fuzzy, buzzing, golden girls.



Close up of a docile honey bee—Photo by Amanda Goble

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