

Hive Minded

As beekeeping goes mainstream, eco-friendly urbanites are swarming-setting up home hives, producing honey and creating a greener planet.

Author Layla Schlack **Photography** Keliy Anderson - Staley



Image – Keliy Anderson – Staley

URBAN BEEKEEPING HAS BEEN GETTING A LOT OF BUZZ (and inspiring a lot of puns) in recent years. It began with scary reports of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), a mysterious ailment that has led to declining bee populations. Then there was the explosive growth of the local food movement, which has led people not only to favor homegrown honey, among other products, but has engendered a greater understanding of the importance of bees in local ecosystems. More recently, New York City legalized the cultivation of hives within city limits, and Michelle Obama had beehives installed in the White House garden.

Indeed, it seems bees are poised to replace teacup dogs as the nation's must-have pet. But walking into Joel Eckel's backyard in Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood feels more like a step back in time than an encounter with the latest fad. Eckel, who founded the Philadelphia Beekeepers Guild in the fall of 2009, keeps his six hives in a massive yard shared by three stately old homes, two from the 1840s and one from the pre-Revolutionary period. The hives abut a huge garden brimming with herbs, fruits and vegetables, just a few yards away from the chicken

coop, where an impressive rooster strolls among his hens. Pointing to a pile of wood in a far corner, Eckel explains that he's hoping to gather enough to heat his house by woodstove all winter. "Sometimes I like to just sit out here with a cup of coffee and watch my bees," he says.

He's not the only one. The guild has grown from 40 members to more than 100 in under a year, and it's not just a Philadelphia phenomenon. "I've never seen anything like it," says Michael S. Thompson, farm manager for the Chicago Honey Co-Op, a cooperative bee farm of about 60 hives. "I've been teaching beekeeping since I was in my twenties—I'm in my sixties now—and there's never been such a surge of interest. I'm having to turn people away from my classes, and I have folks cold-calling me to volunteer on the farm." Meanwhile, the New York City Beekeepers Association, founded in 2008, was already 220 members strong when the city lifted its ban on hives this past March, bringing in a wave of new recruits. The group's president, Andrew Cote, has taught beekeeping to dozens of beginners (newbees?) since the hobby became legal. Last year San Francisco—always at the forefront of foodie trends—saw the opening of the first U.S. boutique devoted to urban beekeeping. And Londoners can employ the services of Honey Bees at Home, which will build a hive, fill it and come around to check on the bees.

You might even say it's the bees knees.

And why not have your own hive? Start-up costs are low, the effort required is relatively minimal, and the end result is decidedly sweet (if you don't mind the occasional sting). Plus, the trend is providing a powerful answer to CCD. As Eckel explains, one theory for the disorder that's gained currency among scientists is that since most commercial beekeeping has long been done in rural areas, where colonies are brought in to fertilize crops, the bees were generally consuming just one type of pollen—and therefore became malnourished. Left to their own devices, bees will travel two miles to forage for nectar, which in an urban area can include some pretty diverse territory, ensuring a varied diet.

In Philadelphia, beekeeping is a part of the city's historic legacy. Lorenzo L. Langstroth, the father of modern beekeeping, was born here 200 years ago. Langstroth's chief contribution was the movable-frame hive—still the default for beekeepers today—which is what allows apiarists to remove combs without angering the colony. The guild is raising funds to erect a plaque at Langstroth's birth site, hopefully in time for next month's Honey Festival.

In an age when specialty honeys such as Greek, New Zealand and Tupelo are available at high-end grocery stores, and connoisseurs know the benefits of each, local honey inspires hometown pride. "I'm kind of a honey addict, and I really wanted South Philly honey," says Adam Nicely, who works in medical publishing and keeps a hive on his neighbor's roof. "It's nice just knowing that something like this can exist in this neighborhood."

Back in Eckel's backyard, as the sun peeks out after a short rain, the bees begin to swarm out of the hive and into the garden, totally indifferent to a four-year-old named Jolie, whose father, Philadelphia beekeeper Adam Schreiber, has stopped by to check out Eckel's swarms. "When it rains, all the bees go inside their house," Jolie explains, flouncing her princess dress as she walks among the hives. "But now it's not raining, so they can come out." Schreiber says that Jolie, a junior apiarist, loves to help out with the hives, especially using the smoker to make the bees

more docile, and she's totally unafraid. "I've never gotten stung," she brags. Kids and bees might strike some as a bad combination, but many youngsters are fascinated by the creatures. "I figured it would be best just to let him get stung, so that he'd learn how to behave around them," Eckel says of his own three-year-old, Isaac. "The poor kid, he got stung right in the face. I felt so bad. But it hasn't deterred him at all." Eckel also keeps a hive at the William Penn Charter School, where he teaches kindergarten.

Fortunately, most honey bees, especially the Italian and Carniolan varieties most common in the U.S., are known for their gentle nature. However, recent years have seen an influx of Russian bees. They're more resistant to mites—another suspected cause of colony collapse—but the Russians are also thought to be more sting-happy than other species. Still, David Harrod, the webmaster for the guild's site, phillybeekeepers.org, says bees are really only aggressive when they have reason to be. "If they're busy and productive, then they're happy," he explains. "If the weather is bad, or there's no nectar, or their queen is missing, then they can be very aggressive. Besides environmental conditions, some colonies can develop aggressive tendencies based on genetics, too. When they do you usually replace the queen."

Harrod started his first hive four years ago, which makes him a relative veteran among the many young members of the Philly guild. He and a friend now have about 20 hives, which he expects will generate several hundred pounds of honey this year. In the past, he's given it away to friends and family. But with a bumper harvest this year, he might actually sell some. Still, for Harrod, the business opportunity is secondary. "I've just developed a real love for bees," he says with a smile, admitting, "It's surprising to find yourself emotionally attached to insects."

Senior editor LAYLA SCHLACK can also be very aggressive when she's hungry.

GENERATE SOME BUZZ

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO START YOUR OWN APIARY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY OLIVER JEFFERS

HIVE

Probably one of Langstroth's design. Paint as you please.

BEES

They can be purchased in "nucs" (nuclei) that include a queen.

VEIL

To protect your face

SMOKER

Calms the bees so they won't sting when you're extracting honey

WAX

Bees will build honeycomb on special etched sheets.