

Locating a site

Locating your apiary in your own garden has many attractions and is the preferred option of many beekeepers. The site is familiar, access is usually good, equipment can be stored nearby and you have the pleasure of watching the bees at work. However, small gardens in urban areas are often beset with problems, typically:

- Keeping bees in a small urban garden near to areas where children play, will often generate complaints, especially when a beekeeper clad in full protective gear is seen tending them.
- Your bees swarming into neighbours' gardens often causes upset.
- Bees making their cleansing flights in early spring seem to target neighbours' washing!
- Not everyone appreciates your bees drinking from their bird bath or garden pool.

It has become increasingly popular in cities to site hives on flat roofs. Providing the access is safe and adequate, this presents few problems. However, carrying heavy supers dripping with honey up narrow stairs and through upstairs windows can be challenging and potentially dangerous.

If your own garden is not an option you will need to consider other possibilities. Commercial fruit growers, market gardeners, and some arable farmers welcome the presence of bees and may well be happy to provide a suitable site for an apiary. Local farmers, land owners, owners of large gardens and gamekeepers are valuable sources of information and often know of suitable locations. Your local Beekeepers Society may also be able to help.

The traditional rental for an apiary site is one jar of honey per hive, although other arrangements may be reached.

There is always the temptation to accept any site offered but avoid doing this at all costs. Inspect the site, preferably with an experienced beekeeper, and assess it against your apiary plan and the points reviewed in this leaflet. Whilst few sites are perfect, if it does not match up to the majority of the aspects you are seeking, decline the site and continue your search.

A poor site will always be difficult to manage. Moving sites can be a major undertaking. Time taken in seeking out a good site will be time very well spent.



Choosing a site for your apiary

Lancaster Beekeepers advisory leaflet No 1

Choosing a place to keep bees is comparable to finding a home for yourself! You need to decide what would be ideal for your requirements and then balance this against what is possible. It will always be a compromise.

Factors to be considered:

1. Will the site cause a nuisance to neighbours or the general public and is it safe from vandals?
2. Is there sufficient forage for honeybees and would your bees compete with nearby apiaries?
3. Is the site environment suitable for bees?
4. Is there convenient access, with minimal carrying, for bringing equipment or removing honey supers?
5. Is there adequate space for the number of hives envisaged?

Consider the public

The general public is often ignorant and frightened of insects and quick to complain if they become alarmed. Their complaints could result in your bees being considered a nuisance and you being forced to remove them.

Bees establish regular flight paths for travelling to forage. Surrounding your apiary with hedges or trellises to force them to fly above head height minimises the chance of contact with people and reduces the visibility of your apiary. Damage to hives from thieves and vandals is not unknown, so making your apiary as unobtrusive as possible is always a sound practice.

Avoid sites that border roads or public paths, especially bridleways. Some bees dislike horses!

Culling aggressive bees and replacing them with more good tempered strains makes beekeeping easier and the public safer.

Forage

Honeybees usually forage for both nectar and pollen within a mile radius of their hive but may travel up to three miles for particularly rewarding sources. They also need to be able to forage from March through to October. Arable land often provides ideal forage for a month or so, after which there is little for the bees. Gardens, which are usually planted with year-round flowering plants, and field-side margins often offer much more. In most areas there is sufficient forage for a small number of hives but it is useful to know the location and size of other apiaries that might compete.

Environment

Locating your apiary in a suitable environment will avoid many pitfalls. Consider the following factors:

- A southerly aspect will usually provide warmer and drier conditions, especially in winter.
- Sites open to cold northerly or easterly winds should be avoided.
- Hives should be sheltered from the prevailing wind. This helps foraging bees to land easily at the hive entrance and avoids hives being blown over by high winds.
- Avoid frost pockets or hollows that could flood.
- Hives should be fenced off from livestock as these have a tendency to kick hives over.
- Bees need water so if no natural source is available, provide a suitable source, away from the main flight paths to avoid fouling.

Access

Easy access to your apiary is essential as moving equipment to and from storage is a constant part of a beekeeper's activities. Do not entertain a site which involves climbing fences or jumping ditches to get access. Vehicular access can be a significant advantage but remember that dry grasslands may become impassable mud in wet weather.

Space

The amount of space needed depends on the number of colonies of bees you intend to keep. Hives roughly occupy a 75cm by 75cm space and should be sited in pairs, at least one metre apart. You should plan to have room for two hives for each colony in order to permit artificial swarming. As it is usually easier to keep two colonies than one, your apiary should be sufficiently large to accommodate four hives. The following factors also need to be taken into account:

- It is important to have access to work on each hive without obstructing the bees' flight paths.
- Ideally you should have space to stack roofs, lifts and supers without moving away from the hive.
- Putting the hives on stands about 35cm above the ground places them at a convenient working height for most beekeepers.

- If possible, hive entrances should face in different directions to avoid bees drifting between hives.

It is usually helpful to measure a proposed apiary site and produce a rough plan of how everything will fit in. Two possible arrangements are illustrated but many other variations will work equally well.

