



THE PENNSYLVANIA BEEKEEPER

The Official Organ of the Pennsylvania State Beekeeper's Association

Are Honey Bees pollinators and beneficial insects? Or insect pests to be eradicated, exterminated and destroyed?

By: Charles Breinig CharlieNoSpam-Beekeeper@yahoo.com

Plymouth Township, Montgomery County, PA has contemplated this question like many local governments. Fortunately for homeowners with vegetable gardeners, flower gardeners, and people concerned about the environment, reason and science outweighed fear and anxiety.

Generally this issue begins when a beekeeper's neighbor learns that a beekeeper lives next door (or in the neighborhood). They don't understand the difference between Honey Bees and yellow jackets/wasps, and they are concerned for the safety of their kids. They complain to the local code enforcement officer, who then issues a notice to the Beekeeper to remove the hive. The code enforcement officer often cite the health and safety code which forbids homeowners from providing harborage (a home) to insect pests and vermin (rats). The notice will threaten a fine if the hive is not removed within 5 days (or similar short period of time).

Since many municipalities in PA use common templates for their health codes, it is helpful if you understand what health codes say.

Sec. 10-84. Elimination of harborages.

*All buildings, lots or premises in the township shall be kept free from any condition conducive to rodents, insects and **other pest-life**.*

Harborage shall mean any condition which provides shelter or protection for rodents, insects or other pest-life. Eradication shall mean the elimination of rodents or insects and other pest-life from any building, lot or premises through the use of traps, baiting, fumigation or any other method of extermination approved by the health officer and subject to applicable laws relating to poisonous substances and fumigants.

The Township health code which regulates pests, defines harborage as shelter for "insects or **other pest life**", clearly indicating that the code is referring to insect **pests**; not all insects (like lady bugs, praying mantis, butterflies and Honey Bees), which are beneficial insects. The key words are "**or other pest life**". Are all bees pests? What makes a bee a pest? Their stinger?

Even myself, before I was educated to the plight of Honey Bees (four years ago), I was scared of bees. As a kid I cut lawns, and was stung by yellow jackets on numerous occasions. I did not understand the difference between Honey Bees, Yellow Jackets and Wasps. Now that I have seen Honey Bees and handled them, I find them sweet, gentle, stinging only when you disturb their hive or crush them. They are not like yellow jackets or wasps, which will sting you multiple times. **When a Honey Bee stings, they die. So they are genetically predisposed to only sting as a matter of last resort.**

Although a yellow jacket may be a pest, her cousin the Honey Bee is not. My wife and I often spend time in the summer taking the roof off our hives and watching our Honey Bees (in T-shirts and shorts, without veils), because they are so fascinating. We have 3-6 hives, and generally lose 50-60% of our hives over the winter. We split the hives in the summer, so we can have at least two hives for the spring pollination of our garden and our neighbor's apple tree, and the nectar flow. Since the Queen starts laying eggs in early January, we need 2-3 strong hives in March when they start foraging for pollen and nectar.

I can't imagine that there is anyone, who has not heard the alarms surrounding the disappearance of Honey Bees. School children are urging their parents to "help the honey bees" <http://www.helpthehoneybees.com/> They are not only critical to our nation's agriculture, they are critical to local gardens as well. There are many supporters of the Honey Bees including local gardening clubs, and environmental groups. This is because most people understand that Honey Bees are beneficial insects and not pests. **Otherwise, who would care?**

Honey Bees differ from Yellow Jackets and Wasps, just as a Seeing-Eye Dog differs from a Wolf. Same species, but entirely different in temperament, and benefit to society.

Who else thinks Honey Bees are beneficial insects?

There are Honey Bees on roof tops in Paris, in the city of Philadelphia, in small boroughs like Jenkintown and Ambler. Even the White House has Honey Bee hives. New York City overturned its ban on beekeeping, because of their increased awareness of the importance of Honey Bees <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/16/bring-on-the-bees/>

The State of PA (and the U.S. Government) consider Honey Bees to be beneficial insects, critical to our state's and nation's agriculture. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are being spent in Pennsylvania (Penn State) and at other Universities, researching the causes of CCD (Colony Collapse Disorder). These funds are earmarked to help the Honey Bee because it is such a beneficial insect. There are **no** experts that consider the Honey Bee to be a pest to be eradicated.

Honey Bees are beneficial and critical to local community gardens and fruit trees. Local Garden clubs, realize that without the Honey Bee, many flowers will not be pollinated, and the diversity of our flowers, and vegetables would diminish. My neighbor, who was initially concerned about my hives, now recounts what a wonderful bounty his apple tree produces, now that I have hives. Honey Bees are not just beneficial, they are critical to local vegetable gardens, fruit trees, and flowers. However, many members of the public are not aware how important they are, plus they are fearful of being stung. If only we could educate them as to how un-dangerous Honey Bees are!

Four years ago, I too was unaware and fearful of Honey Bees. But now that I understand that I will not be stung unless I crush them or disturb their hive, I have learned to love and appreciate them. I also know that if I use a smoker, I can even disturb their hives and not get stung. I often do so without a veil or any protective clothing (in a T-shirt and shorts). Now that I have had Honey Bees land on my arm, and watched them lick salt from my arm, I am not fearful. I have even had a local cub-scout troop come to look at my hives. The kids were fascinated and not fearful.

Parents want to protect their kids. We understand that. Seeing pictures of a beekeeper and their kids, at their hive, pulling a frame in their normal summer garb can demonstrate how docile Honey Bees are. Showing pictures of hives on small lots in local boroughs and in cities, where the lots are 25' wide will demonstrate you don't need to have 1 acre lots. As we all know, bees will leave the hive, flying out 10' and then zoom up to the tree line, flying up to 2-3 miles to get nectar and pollen. So neighbors should have little fear of the bees congregating in their yard.

Maintaining a healthy diverse population of Honey Bees in our neighborhoods is important not only for their survival, but also for their genetic diversity as a species. There are many more Beekeepers in our communities, than the public knows about, because beekeepers understand the unfounded fear and reaction that many people have concerning bees. Thus hives are in inconspicuous places.

Interesting facts:

1. Did you know that Honey Bees are strict vegetarians, eating only plant products (pollen and nectar), and never land on meat.
2. Did you know that Yellow Jackets are carnivorous wasps, and are a nuisance at picnics where they gather meat?
3. Did you know that 15% to 30% of the Honey Bees you see flying are collecting pollen, (varying from 50-300 flowers per load, and making 1-50 trips a day to do so)?
4. Did you know that the other flying Honey Bees are collecting nectar (100-1500 flowers per load), and making 1-29 trips per day?
5. Their Trips last from 5-15 minutes.

That is a lot of pollination!

To conclude: Honey Bees are beneficial to local community gardens and fruit trees, and pose little risk to the health, safety and welfare of the public. They are not aggressive like other bees and are not a pest. Honey Bees are kept in managed hives and are not a random unwanted infestation. There are constant news articles about the national threat to our food supply, due to Bee colony losses. But having local beekeepers is just as important to local flower gardeners and vegetable gardeners, as having water and compost. Local Beekeepers are an insurance policy against devastating losses by large commercial growers, and provide a unique opportunities to maintain and ensure genetic diversity. The public is not aware of how many local beekeepers there are in their neighborhoods, because Beekeepers are good at shielding the hives from public view Any time I see a Honeybee, I know there is a beekeeper near by. There are many residents whose first reaction on learning of a neighboring beehive is fear. Outlawing Beekeeping because of that unfounded fear, would negatively impact the health and enjoyment of other residents who are gardeners and have wonderful organic vegetable garden, great wildflower gardens, and chemical-free fruit trees that yield bountiful harvests. Also, impacting consumers seeking out local honey because it is healthier than store bought. Preserving local Beekeeping is vital! Let's uphold this valuable avocation!

Update: Soon to be Beekeepers, Mr. and Mrs. Schaffer, shared the good news about Plymouth Township's position on beekeeping. They asked the code officials to allow them to meet with the Township Council during their monthly work session; where they shared a 15 minute presentation. The purpose was to request reconsideration of an interpretation of the current code to allow beekeeping in residential areas of Plymouth.

With the advice of the Vince Aloyo of the Montgomery County Beekeepers Association, the Schaffers planned a presentation for the Council. The Schaffers, along with Joel Eckels, Anne Javsicas, Charlie Breinig and Jim Bobb attended the meeting and shared information in their allotted 15 minutes.

Joel Eckels shared photos of his brother and himself working their hives in Philadelphia without veils, with their faces right up against the frames watching the bees. Obviously the pictures showed that beekeepers have no reason to be afraid of the Honey Bees, even when they are disturbing the hives and removing frames of Honey Bees for inspection. Joel also testified that Philadelphia is a much more densely populated area, and has many hives in much closer proximity to neighbors. Pictures from a home on a 50' wide lot in Jenkintown Borough (with 3 hives) was also shown, as additional evidence of safe Beekeeping on small lots.

Jim Bobb, a Montgomery County Beekeeper, and Chairman of EAS (Eastern Apicultural Society) testified on the temperament of Bees and having permanent observation hives in very public areas like Longwood Gardens (The Longwood Garden Treehouse, is a favorite for families; the beehive entrance directs bees away from the tree, but they fly all over the area). A beehive in such a public place demonstrates that they are not dangerous.

Anne Javsicas, head of the Plymouth Meeting Friends School told about having hives on the school grounds, and the problems they faced with stings from yellow jackets, which were attracted to kids eating lunch outside; yet not one sting from a Honey Bee. Asked how she knew if the stings were from yellow jackets and not Honey Bees, she explained that Honey Bees sting only once and leave the stinger in the skin. Jim pointed out that Honey Bees are vegetarians and are not attracted to the student lunches.

The Schaffers are happy to report that the Plymouth Township Council voted unanimously to meet with staff to see if the interpretation could be reevaluated. They waited a few weeks for the Township to formulate an official position on beekeeping. The decision was that beekeeping is permissible in the Township. The only requirement is to register with the Township by obtaining a \$25 permit; just as dog owners would need to do.

Sources of Additional Information:

1. Do you have Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD)? Dennis vanEngelsdorp (the Acting State Apiarist for the PA Department of Agriculture) thinks that we might.... and that it may be contributing to CCD.... "Make Meadows Not Lawns" is one of his quotes, and it would make a great bumper sticker. He remarks that 11% of all pesticide use in the US goes to maintaining our lawns, which are sterile fields as far as the bees are concerned -- no pollen sources in evidence!
See his You-Tube video at **The Taste3 conferences:** [2007 video- The Joy of Bees](#)
[2008 video-Where Have the Bees Gone](#)
2. **Movies**, on the importance of Bees: [Vanishing of the Bees \(Move Trailer\)](#) and [Pollen Nation \(Movie Trailer\)](#)
3. Animal Planet's "Overcoming One's Fear of Bees" shows you can feed honey bees in the palm of your hand. <http://animal.discovery.com/videos/my-extreme-animal-phobia-man-scared-of-bees.html>
4. **Websites:**
 - a. <http://www.helpthehoneybees.com/> Häagen-Dazs
 - b. <https://agdev.anr.udel.edu/maarec/> Mid-Atlantic Apicultural Research and Extension Consortium
5. **News Articles:**
 - a. **CNN, "Disappearing Bees Threaten Ice Cream Sellers"**
http://money.cnn.com/2008/02/17/news/companies/bees_icecream/
 - b. **National Geographic, "Bee decline May Spell End of Some Fruits, Vegetables"**
http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/10/1005_041005_honeybees_2.html
 - c. **FOX NEWS, "Following Honeybee Disappearance, Bumblebees Begin Vanishing Act"**
<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,299982,00.html>
 - d. **NPR (National Public Radio) "Bee Deaths, Loss of Navigation Cause Concern"**
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9972616>
 - e. **IANR (Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources), University of Nebraska "Help Disappearing Bees by being Sustainable, Having Diverse Resources"**
<http://ianrnews.unl.edu/static/0807301.shtml>
 - f. **New York Times "Honeybees Vanish, and Scientists Race for Reasons"**
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/24/science/24bees.html?pagewanted=all>
 - g. **60 Minutes "What's Wrong With The Honeybees?"**
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/25/60minutes/main3407762.shtml>
 - h. **BBC "Disappearing Bees Puzzle Experts"**
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/somerset/6587069.stm
 - i. **The Independent (Britain) "Why are honey bees disappearing, and What can Save Them?"**
<http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/the-big-question-why-are-honey-bees-disappearing-and-what-can-be-done-to-save-them-813971.html>