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Ten things to do to help honeybees

Honeybees are under threat worldwide because of virulent viruses against which they have no natural defences. Nearly all colonies in the wild have died out and without beekeepers to care for them, honeybees could disappear in a few years. Here's what you can do to help

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A beekeeper tending to his hive. Photograph: Matt Cardy/Getty

Dr Ivor Davis, master beekeeper and past president of the British Beekeepers' Association, suggests 10 things anyone can do to help protect our honeybees

1. Become a beekeeper

Beekeeping is a most enjoyable, fascinating and interesting hobby – and you get to eat your own honey too. Every year local beekeeping associations run courses to help new people to take up beekeeping and even help them find the equipment they need and a colony of bees. Training programmes continue to allow enthusiasts to become Master Beekeepers. For information on courses visit the British Beekeepers' Association (BBKA) web site

2. Help to protect swarms

Swarming is a natural process when colonies of honeybees can increase their numbers. If you see a swarm contact the local authority or the police who will contact a local beekeeper who will collect the swarm and take it away. Honeybees in a swarm are usually very gentle and present very little danger. They can be made aggressive if disturbed or sprayed with water. Just leave them alone and wait for a competent beekeeper to arrive.

3. Plant your garden with bee friendly plants

In areas of the country where there are few agricultural crops, honeybees rely upon garden flowers to ensure they have a diverse diet and to provide nectar and pollen. Encourage honeybees to visit your garden by planting single flowering plants and vegetables. Go for all the allium family, all the mints, all beans except French beans and flowering herbs. Bees like daisy-shaped flowers - asters and sunflowers, also tall plants like hollyhocks, larkspur and foxgloves. Bees need a lot of pollen and trees are a good source of food. Willows and lime trees are exceptionally good. the BBKA has leaflets on bee friendly trees and shrubs.

4. Buy local honey

Local honey will be prepared by local beekeepers. This keeps food miles down and helps the beekeeper to cover the costs of beekeeping. Local honey complies with all food standards requirements but is not mistreated to give it a long shelf life. It tastes quite different to foreign supermarket honey and has a flavour that reflects local flora.

5. Ask your MP to improve research into honey bee health

Beekeepers are very worried that we do not have enough information to combat the diseases that affect honeybees. Pollination by honeybees contributes £165m annually to the agricultural economy. Yet the government only spends £200,000 annually on honeybee research. Beekeepers have costed a five-year, £8m programme to secure the information to save our bees during which time pollination will contribute more than £800m to the government coffers. Even the Defra minister, Lord Rooker, who holds the purse strings to finance this, has said that without this extra research we could lose our honeybees within ten years. Write to MPs in support of the bee health research funding campaign.

6. Find space for a beehive in your garden

Many would-be beekeepers, especially in urban areas, find it difficult to find a safe space for their colony of bees. If you have some space contact your local beekeeping association and they could find a beekeeper in need of a site. It is amazing what a difference a beehive will make to your garden. Crops of peas and beans will be better, fruit trees will crop well with fruit that is not deformed and your garden will be buzzing!

7. Remove jars of foreign honey from outside the back door

Believe it or not but honey brought in from overseas contains bacteria and spores that are very harmful to honeybees. If you leave a honey jar outside it encourages honeybees to feed on the remaining honey. There is a good possibility that this will infect the bee and in turn the bee will infect the rest of the colony resulting in death of the colony. Always wash out honey jars and dispose of them carefully.

8. Encourage local authorities to use bee friendly plants in public spaces

Some of the country's best gardens and open spaces are managed by local authorities. Recently these authorities have recognised the value of planning gardens, roundabouts and other areas with flowers that attract bees. Encourage your authority to improve the area you live in by adventurous planting schemes. These can often be maintained by local residents if the authority feels they do not have sufficient resources.

9. Learn more about this fascinating insect

Beekeeping is fascinating. Honeybees have been on this earth for about 25 million years and are ideally adapted to their natural environment. Without honeybees the environment would be dramatically diminished. Invite a beekeeper to come and talk to any local group you support and give an illustrated talk about the honeybee and the products of the hive. They might bring a few jars of honey too Honeybees are a part of our folklore and are one of only two insect species that are managed to provide us with essential services.

10. Bee friendly

When kept properly, bees are good neighbours, and only sting when provoked. Beekeepers wear protective clothing when they are handling bees. If a bee hovers inquiringly in front of you when unprotected, do NOT flap your hands. Stay calm and move slowly away, best into the shade of shed or a tree. The bee will soon lose interest. It is worth remembering that bees do not like the smell of alcohol on people, the "animal" smell of leather clothing, even watchstraps. Bees regard dark clothing as a threat – it could be a bear! Bees are sometimes confused by scented soaps, shampoos and perfumes, best avoided near the

hive.