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Alyssa Smith, college student, athlete and Texas Heart Institute patient.



Bees in the City? New York May Let the Hives Come Out of Hiding



Michelle V. Ajins/The New York Times

"The real danger is the skewed public perception of the danger of honeybees," said Andrew Coté, of the New York City Beekeepers Association.

By MIREYA NAVARRO

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Kathleen Boyer suspects the mailman.

She said she could not think of anyone else in her neighborhood who would have complained about the two beehives she kept under a pine tree in her front yard in Flatbush, Brooklyn, leading the city's health department to fine her \$2,000 last fall.

"I was kind of surprised," said Mrs. Boyer, an art director with a media company. "People see us in our bee suit and they'd bring their kids to watch us and ask us questions."

New York City is among the few jurisdictions in the country that deem beekeeping illegal, lumping the [honeybee](#) together with hyenas, tarantulas, cobras, dingoes and other animals considered too dangerous or venomous for city life. But the honeybee's bad rap — and the days of urban beekeepers being outlaws — may soon be over.

On Tuesday, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's board will take up the issue of amending the health code to allow residents to keep hives of *Apis mellifera*, the common, nonaggressive honeybee. Health department officials said the change was being considered after research showed that the reports of bee stings in the city were minimal and that honeybees did not pose a public health threat.

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The officials were also prodded by beekeepers who, in a petition and at a public hearing last month, argued that their hives promoted sustainable agriculture in the city.

A ban, of course, has not deterred many New Yorkers from setting up hives on rooftops and in yards and community gardens, doing it as a hobby, to pollinate their plants or to earn extra income from honey. Although the exact number of beekeepers in the city is unknown, many openly flout the law. They have their own association, hold beekeeping workshops, sell their honey at farmers' markets and tend to their hives as unapologetically as others might jaywalk, blaming their legal predicament on people's ignorance of bees.

"People fear that if there's a beehive on their rooftop, they'll be stung," said Andrew Coté, president of the [New York City Beekeepers Association](#), which was formed two years ago and has 220 members.

"Honeybees are interested in water, pollen and nectar," he said. "The real danger is the skewed public perception of the danger of honeybees."

Still, some beekeepers say their renegade status causes headaches.

Sam Elchert, 22, a [Columbia University](#) student who is majoring in writing and philosophy, said it took him months to find a suitable home for his hives, which resemble short wood filing cabinets with movable frames inside. His building's management turned him down, fearing legal problems because of the hives, he said. A community garden in Brooklyn welcomed the hives, but wanted them tucked away in the bushes where they would not get the sunlight they needed.

A friend of Mr. Elchert's, who owned a brownstone in Manhattan complete with a backyard, declined to house the hives because his father was a lawyer, Mr. Elchert said. So did Columbia, where officials in charge of dining services and some green roofs said no, though they were supportive.

A teacher hosted the bees on her farm in Connecticut for a couple of months while Mr. Elchert kept up his search for a home for his hives. Finally, in June, a community garden in Harlem agreed, and Mr. Elchert goes there every other week to tend to the hives. He said that an article he read last year about beekeeping introduced him to the hobby, which he finds "oddly relaxing," he said. He said he had also read about declines in the bee population and wanted to do his part to nurture the insects.

"It is a good cause, and there's some sense of morality, even if we're not on the right side of the law," he said.

But Mr. Elchert admits that so far he has found his hobby more "nerve-racking" than relaxing, and inspects the garden only on weekdays to avoid weekend crowds.

"What if somebody, some cop, sees me?" he said. "It'd cost me \$2,000. It'd really ruin my day."

Busted beekeepers, as it turns out, are not exactly common. In 2009, 53 inspections were conducted in response to calls related to the harboring of bees and wasps, health officials said, and 13 resulted in notices of violation and fines of \$200 to \$2,000. In 2008, 48 inspections were made and 7 citations were issued.

Beekeepers say that beekeeping is a relatively low-maintenance and inexpensive endeavor — Mr. Elchert said he spent \$500 on hives, equipment and about 20,000 bees to start.

Recently, 70 people filled a room in Lower Manhattan for an "Urban Beekeeping 101" workshop held by the New York City Beekeepers Association.

The class seemed more concerned about the challenges of keeping hives in tight, tall spaces than with the legality of beekeeping, asking questions like: "How high should the hives

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be?" (About five stories.) And "How much space is needed around the hives so that the bees can fly out to pollinate?" (At least 10 feet.)

But some students were worried about their liability should someone be stung, a hazard that leads most beekeepers to wear protective gear when they tend their hives.

"I'm not even allowed on the roof of my building," said Matt Griffin, 33, a cook from Queens who said he would probably wait for the law to change and figure out "a few issues" before setting up his hives.

Katrinka Moore, 56, a poet and book editor in the financial district, said that if the law changed, she would ask neighboring churches to host her bees.

That would mean an end to life on the run for Mrs. Boyer's two hives. They are now lodged with a friend — Mrs. Boyer would not say where — but she plans to retrieve them once they are legal.

Mrs. Boyer said that she and her husband, Chico, took up beekeeping last year so that they could teach workshops in Haiti, where Mr. Boyer was born.

The earthquake has delayed the couple's plans, but their hives are thriving with 80,000 bees that have yielded more than 100 pounds of honey.

"We gave it to friends for Christmas," Mrs. Boyer said. "They love it. Everybody is asking for more."

Ms. Moore said that after working in advocacy against gas drilling in upstate New York, she looked to beekeeping for some relief.

She said: "You get honey. You're also pollinating gardens. It's such a positive, happy thing to do."

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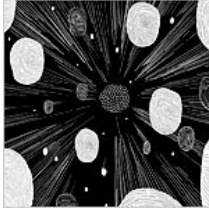


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