

FIRST PERSON

Marc Wollast, 43, is an urban beekeeper. He says bees are less harmful than we think

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I live in Watermael-Boitsfort and have always been a resident of the green areas around Brussels. Being in touch with nature even so close to the city is important to me. My son and I came across a stand for the Brussels Beekeepers Association about five years ago at the Brussels Region's Fête de l'Environnement, and we were fascinated that there was such a thing as urban beekeepers. I signed up for a course at the Natural History Museum in Brussels and immediately caught the bug.

It's an apprentice system where someone more experienced guides you for the first couple of years, which makes it very easy to start. It's down to tradition, really.

I have installed apiaries on top of my garage. Anyone is allowed to have apiaries in their garden, but the maximum without a licence is two. An average colony will have 60,000 bees. With three apiaries you can have up to 200,000 bees, which tends to scare people.

There are two important rules to keep in mind. First, the apiaries must be a certain distance from any houses. Secondly, in case of incidents, the burden of proof is reversed. That is, if someone says your bees have stung them, you need to prove that it was not your bees. That can get tricky.

These days, people are very scared of bees because they confuse them with wasps. Wasps like to hang around people and barbecues because they have the same diet. They are carnivorous and won't hesitate to fight humans to get food that's on the table. They have actual teeth and can sting several times.

Bees, on the other hand, die after one sting and can't bite. And they can only pick up tiny objects. A wasp can actually grab and tear a piece of meat and will defend or attack if it needs to. Bees simply aren't interested, unless they are defending their home within a couple of metres. They are vegetarian and will go to flowers to get pollen or nectar. So when people describe the behaviour of the insect that bit them, we can usually say whether it's a wasp or a bee.

In towns, people also tend to buy non-aggressive breeds. The best in Europe come from Luxembourg. A good bee should be non-aggressive but still very



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productive. Italian ones are renowned for this, but they are not adapted to our climate and start breeding too soon.

You don't normally buy colonies unless you want pedigree ones, like with dogs. Mostly people give them away because they reproduce like mice. Every year, half the colony leaves with the queen and sets up a new colony. The bees left behind will breed a new queen. The problem is double-edged for beekeepers because both colonies will stop making honey until they are at full strength again. And every year you have twice as many colonies. Plus, it only takes a

couple of minutes for a colony to split, and 20,000 bees in the air quickly looks like it does in the movies. People start calling the police and fire brigades. But authorities are usually aware of any beekeepers in the area.

The trick is to fool the colony into thinking it has already split by removing only a fraction of the bees. After the reproduction period, you can reintroduce them.

Last year I produced about 450 kilos of honey. My family eats about 20 kilos, and the rest we give away or sell. It can be a tidy little earner, easily covering costs with an extra €500 or so a year. But that's not really the point of it. With beekeeping, you either love it or hate it. Me, I got stung.

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Interview by Peter Philp