

Adventures in Urban Beekeeping

The sweet feats of the Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative

By Jennifer Skelton
Photographs by Laura Berman

A unique partnership with a few hundred thousand honeybees is creating numerous educational and micro-enterprise opportunities in Toronto.

FOR MOST PEOPLE IN THE CITY, THE word *insect* has a negative connotation. Insects are generally associated with all things unpleasant: the annoying mosquitoes that steal blood and occasionally transmit West Nile Virus, the disgusting flies that feast on dog poo minutes before walking over someone's lunch, the ill-tempered yellow-jackets of late summer intent on disturbing the peace of a neighbourhood barbeque. But for members of the Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative and their partner

organization, FoodShare, an insect is considered a friend: the hard-working honeybee has become the partner in an unusual urban agriculture project that provides a diverse range of benefits to the community.

FoodShare is a non-profit organization that works to

it's no wonder environmentally conscious people are turning to local sugar sources like honey. Honey, which contains an array of vitamins, minerals, amino acids and anti-oxidants, also has the advantage of being a much healthier sweetener than refined sugarcane.

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improve access to affordable, nutritious food. In 2001, FoodShare's Urban Agriculture Program received funding from Heifer International, a US-based NGO that works on food security issues worldwide, to start a beekeeping project in the city. Part of the deal was that FoodShare "pass on the gift" to other community-based organizations by providing them with beekeeping training and a few start-up beehives. The Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative was formed in the fall of 2001 by some of the individuals that had received the initial training. Three hives were passed from FoodShare to the Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative in the spring of 2002 and today the organizations jointly keep twelve hives. FoodShare also passed on three hives to Everdale Environmental Learning Centre in 2003 as part of the original agreement with Heifer.

The unique partnership between FoodShare, the Toronto Beekeepers Co-operative, and a few hundred thousand honeybees is creating numerous educational and micro-enterprise opportunities in the community. In addition, the honey and pollination services provided by the bees contribute significantly to the urban food harvest and to biodiversity in the city. As with other wildlife, native pollinators are not abundant in cities. Honeybees can provide important pollination services to urban gardens, leading to more productive urban fruit and vegetable harvests. Honeybees also pollinate non-food plants in gardens and natural areas. This contributes to overall biodiversity in cities since these plants may be food sources for wildlife.

Urban beekeeping also provides a local source of sugar, thereby reducing the need for imported cane sugar from tropical countries. This is welcome news for sweet-toothed environmentalists: according to the World Wildlife Fund, sugar cane production is responsible for more biodiversity loss than any other crop worldwide ("Sugar and the Environment," 2004). This is largely due to habitat destruction to make way for sugar plantations. Additional environmental impacts from sugar cane production include the loss of cropland due to soil erosion, polluted run-off caused by intensive use of agricultural chemicals, overuse of water for irrigation, and air pollution from the pre-harvest burning of cane fields. Add to this the energy required to refine cane sugar and ship it to Canada, and

THE TWENTY OR SO MEMBERS OF the Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative share an enthusiasm for beekeeping. Most members, however, have little or no previous beekeeping experience. FoodShare and the co-op hire an experienced beekeeper as a mentor to ensure that members learn proper beekeeping skills. Also, long-term co-op members take on additional responsibility in helping newer members learn the ropes. This mentoring process serves to foster greater involvement and ensure that skills are shared among members. Co-op member Maria Kasstan says she joined the co-op "because it was the only responsible way to learn about beekeeping in an urban setting. The teaching and support from the pros, the sense of having others who would catch my errors and compensate for my lack of insight, and even the process of working co-



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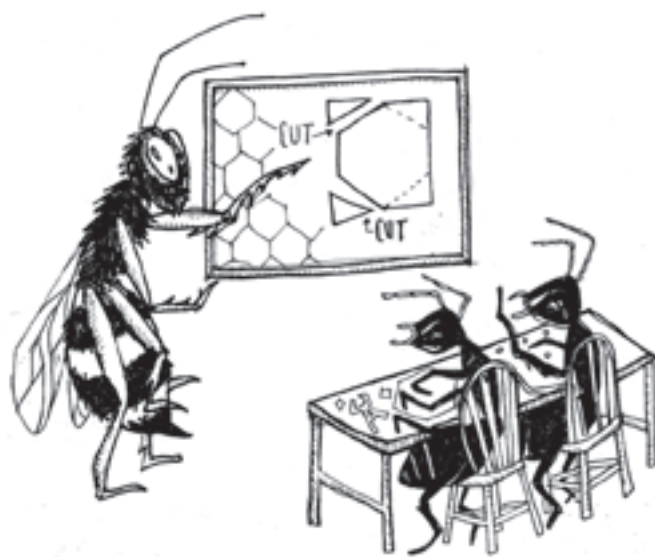
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operatively with others in this loosely structured setting, have taught me a lot.”

One former co-op member is now keeping her own hives and many other members hope to do the same.

For most people living in the city, joining the Toronto Beekeepers Co-operative is the only accessible way to learn how to keep bees.



“The educational component of this urban beekeeping experiment extends beyond the participating members.”

THE EDUCATIONAL COMPONENT OF THIS urban beekeeping experiment extends beyond the participating members. FoodShare is able to use the project as an educational tool to teach people about local ecology and innovative opportunities for urban food production. Participants of FoodShare’s Focus on Food Youth Program have also benefited. This program offers marginalized youth opportunities for personal development while gaining job experience. The youth receive a workshop on basic beekeeping and have been involved in various ways. According to Karine Jaouich, Urban Agriculture Coordinator of FoodShare, “the youth are always fascinated with the bees. They love learning as much as possible about them. They especially love to learn about the biology of bees and their social world and interactions. Extracting the honey from the frames and bottling and selling it are great projects for them. They get really involved in the process.”

Popular education is a primary objective for both the co-op and FoodShare. During the off-season, members of the co-op organize workshops on various related topics

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ILLUSTRATION: THE BEEHIVE DESIGN COLLECTIVE



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such as apitherapy (healing with bee products), cream- and salve-making with bee products, brewing mead (honey wine), and candle-making. FoodShare generally assists in making these workshops available to the public for free. Basic beekeeping workshops are also sometimes offered. This year FoodShare and the Beekeepers Cooperative received a grant to purchase an observation hive and create some signs for the project. This should help facilitate future educational bee tours for the public that emphasize the role honeybees play in pollination and food production in the city.

IN THE PRESENT GLOBAL MARKET, THE food eaten by the Canadian consumer often travels from California, parts of Europe, or elsewhere. Food transport is a major contributor to fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. As public awareness grows about how far most of our food travels, many people are turning to urban agriculture as both an economically practical and environmentally responsible way to access locally grown food.

Partly as a result of this growing environmental awareness, community gardening is booming in popularity in cities across Canada. By practicing and promoting urban beekeeping, the Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative

and FoodShare are demonstrating that a diverse range of food products can be produced in the city. As co-op member Renee Pilgrim notes, “All that most of us see in the city is concrete. But the bees can find nectar here and produce some of the sweetest honey—that truly is a talent!”

The urban beekeeping project is slowly moving from a position of relative obscurity in a neglected part of the city to one that is sparking curiosity and interest in neighbourhoods across the region. A few years ago, the Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative nearly collapsed due to member burnout; today there is a waiting list to join and new people showing interest all the time. In addition, various community organizations across the city have expressed interest in hosting bees on their property, often on rooftops. FoodShare and the Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative would love to see urban beekeeping continue to spread in the city and hope to build this capacity by training new beekeepers.

It requires over 500 honeybees to produce a pound of honey; it will require at least that many trained beekeepers to realize the potential of urban beekeeping in Toronto and other cities. Isn't it time we gave bees a chance? 🐝

Jennifer Skelton is an active member of the Toronto Beekeepers Cooperative. To contact the co-op, email torontobees@yahoo.ca

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