

A B C's

of Beekeeping

By Sandy Tabako

Avoid Beeyard Chaos

What can cause things to 'go wrong' in your beeyard and beyond? How these issues can be prevented or changed to help create calm instead of chaos.

- Old beekeeping equipment and boxes laying around?

Designate an area in a garage or shed to store your beekeeping supplies, as well as unused equipment that needs cleaning, painting, or repair. Protect your investment. Leaving it outside causes it to deteriorate more quickly, can be difficult to navigate around, and attracts unwanted pests and critters. I've learned the hard way!

- Weeds and overgrown plants taking over your yard and apiary?

Break out the loppers, clippers, weed whippers, flame weeders, and trash cans or bags. Weeds and grasses growing up around the stands and hive boxes, as well as low hanging branches reaching down and touching the hives, can provide a convenient bridge which invites ants. It also makes it more difficult to get to your hives safely to check them. And I have to admit that when you drop your hive tool it is much easier to find if it's not hidden in leaves and weeds. Keep things trimmed and cleaned up. You can pour boiling water or white vinegar on weeds if pulling them is difficult. If you do not plan to grow things in the area, salt is also a non-toxic and effective way to safely kill weeds and is more permanent as it sterilizes the soil. Choose bee-friendly products if you must use something stronger.

- Hoses, gardening tools, and plastic pots creating tripping hazards?

Getting tired after gardening is to be expected, but get into the habit of cleaning up after yourself. Put away those bags of potting soil and extra pots. Roll up that hose. Clean and store your tools properly. Use common sense. It is not fun to trip over a hose or tools hiding in the weeds at any time, but when you are suited up and working with your bees....it is actually dangerous. Again, I speak from experience. Keep the area around your bee yard and within your beeyard clean, clear, and free of clutter so you can easily see where you're going!

- **These first three 'hints' are even more important if you are moving hives into or out of your apiary. Think safety and clear pathways.**

- Are the bees too curious when you barbeque and/or dine on the patio?

Some people put up a bamboo screen, a fence, a privacy room divider, or a trellis with vines around their apiary. This also helps to direct bees away from kid's play areas and pools. Is it possible to hang a sunshade or curtain from your patio to create a barrier between you and your bees? That will help discourage them from flying through your area. Even more effective if you rub the shade with a fabric softener sheet or spray it with a mist of a few drops of lavender, mint, eucalyptus, or cinnamon essential oil mixed into water. These are scents that typically deter and even repel bees. (do NOT use lemon grass essential as it will attract them instead!) Burning scented candles can help divert bees. Fans are helpful to re-direct the bees away from you. It is also advised to serve beverages (especially soda, lemonade, or sweet drinks) in clear plastic cups (even with lids!) to help prevent bees and wasps from sharing your drink. They often crawl inside canned beverages and you cannot see them. . . it is not pleasant when you take a sip and get an unwelcome surprise!

- Need to discourage your bees from getting water from neighborhood pools?

Make sure you are providing a constant water source for your bees....a fountain works well and the moving water deters mosquitoes from breeding there. A slow drip from a hose or faucet onto a piece of wood makes a great watering station and needs no maintenance. A flat pan or saucer of water filled with rocks or sticks so the bees can stand and safely drink works well and costs basically nothing to provide if you use what you have around your house. Same with a bird bath. A bowl of water with corks floating on top also provides a safety 'raft' for the bees. A large planter filled with water and water hyacinth plants is a favorite watering station for bees. . . best to get some mosquito fish (look like guppies and are free from your county vector control), use a small pump to circulate the water, or change the water every few days. . . keep in mind, though, that the bees actually prefer water that has some algae and may be unhappy if you refresh their 'perfect' water!

- Having a hard time gardening or being outside without being dive-bombed?

Are you wearing fragrance, or scented hair products? Bees are naturally attracted to certain scents, repelled by others. Wear unscented sunscreen for protection. I've recently read that if you put a fabric softener sheet in your pocket, or rub it on your clothing, it may help keep bees away as they dislike that fragrance. Wearing bright colors? Bees are curious creatures and may come to check out your colorful attire. Instead, wear white or very light, neutral colors which won't excite the bees as much. I also recently learned that bees can't really discern between fur and hair. . . and since creatures that prey on bees, such as bears, skunks, possums, raccoons, etc. all have fur, when they see our hair they wonder if we are the enemy! Wearing a hat may help prevent those curious bees from getting tangled up in your hair. Did you eat a banana? You are now exhaling a scent similar to the alarm pheromone bees produce when under a stressful situation. Are you working in the "bee line"? Think of a 10 foot long runway for take offs and landings in front of each hive. . . this is the "bee line" and it is best to avoid standing or working directly within that zone. If you must work here, or very close to the hives, try to do so between 9 AM and 1 PM on a sunny day when a large percentage of the hive's bees are away foraging and there will be less 'air traffic'.

- Do the bees cluster around your patio light and send you inside at night?

Bees, like moths, have what is called a 'positive phototactic' reaction to bright light. This phototaxis is what helps bees use the sun to navigate their way to and from their hives for foraging. While bees typically do not come out of their hives at night unless disturbed, they may be curious to come check

out your porch or patio light, which is usually white or yellow. If there is vibration in the area from music, talking, and laughter, they are more likely to come and investigate. How to deter this? Again, a curtain or shade may help shield the light from the bees. Dimming the lights could help. Using a colored bulb really helps. . . not that you want to look like a party house, but red, blue, and green lights are not as bright and don't seem to attract as many insects, including bees. Another hint here: if checking bees at night with a flashlight, you will discourage them from flying at the light by placing something red over the lense of your light. . . bees can't see the color red. A piece of red cellophane held on with a rubber band works great and is reusable. A piece of red cloth or tissue paper also works.

- Are you avoiding enjoying your pool because there are so many bees in the water?

As we discussed earlier, make sure you have adequate water sources available for your bees. Some books suggest placing your water source about 25–30 feet from the hive as it is easier for the bees to 'give directions' to their foraging sisters. However, bees will eventually find the water if it is closer to their hive. Provide footing for the bees as they don't swim well. More than one article I've read mentions the use of fabric softener sheets, or dryer sheets, as a deterrent for bees. They suggest hanging them in strategic areas around the pool, or even rubbing the sheets on rafts, floats, or towels to fragrance them. I suppose you could also rub a sheet around the perimeter of the pool. And, as before, unscented sunscreen attracts less bees.

- Will bees still get into the pool? Yes, they probably will. I used to scoop them out with a handful of water and throw them onto the decking or into the bushes. . . thinking I would save them. Usually it worked, but that's how I also got stung. . . so much for saving that bee! Remember that when anything touches a bee on her back she feels threatened and may sting in defense. Now I use a stick or even my finger and let the bee crawl on. She seems relieved and actually thankful. It is interesting to watch her clean off the water and dry herself before flying away. Skimmer nets work well to retrieve drowning bees. Just be watchful as you swim and play in the water.

- Were you careful about the placement of your hives?

The things you want to keep in mind when choosing a location for your hives are: where are your doors and pathways in your yard? Which areas do you use the most often? Where are your neighbors' doors and walkways? Are you near a sidewalk? You want to direct the entrance of your hives AWAY from those areas where people will often be walking and moving around. Remember the "Bee Line" we mentioned earlier. . . keep that runway area clear if possible as that will be ideal for your bees. Bees will redirect their flight path if it is blocked, as by a fence ...they will come out and immediately fly upward, and then kind of dive in or make U-turns when returning to their hive. It's a good idea to keep them as far as possible from neighbors....a minimum of 15 feet is suggested. Try to set up your hives where they are out of the public view. You certainly don't want to draw attention to the fact that you are keeping bees in your yard unless you live in the country. Is there something causing constant or frequent noise and vibration in your yard....such as an air conditioner? A dryer vent? Pool equipment? Best to keep the bees away from those if possible. It can make the nicest bees get cranky, so set them up in a quieter area. The entrance to the hives can face any direction except north, which never gets direct sun. Most of my hives face south, but facing east for sunrise or west for sunset also works just fine. Do you have adequate space behind or next to your hives to access them easily when working on them? Are they shielded from excessive wind? Do they have any shade? Did you tip their hive slightly forward to allow any rain to drain outwards? I also place an extra piece of wood on top of the hive cover, extending it out about 6 inches from the

hive. This kind of gives them a “shady porch” at their entrance, and also helps deflect any moisture from falling directly into their landing zone.

- Are you mindful of the activities in your neighborhood?

As a conscientious and courteous beekeeper, you will want to be aware of the normal activities happening around you. For example, if you know your neighbors have a family BBQ and get together every Sunday afternoon, it's not a good idea to be opening up your hives on Sunday morning. Lots of families have birthday parties and celebrations during the weekends. . . so if you can plan to check your hives on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, they will be calmed down by the weekend. If you know your next door neighbor mows their lawns every Thursday, be respectful and leave your hives closed on that day. If you notice something big going on around you, be flexible and change your schedule accordingly.

- Did you think 'open feeding' was a good idea and would save time?

While it sounds convenient to put out a centralized “feeding station” for all of your bees, did you know it is actually illegal to do so in the state of California if you are feeding them honey? Article 12 Sanitation Code 29178. It has the potential to spread disease, causes a general feeding frenzy, and can actually encourage robbing instead of the other way around. It is much safer and calmer to give each individual hive their own food, which you can control and monitor as opposed to an open feeding situation. Again, if you were out in the middle of acreage in the country, it may be allowable to set up a sugar or pollen feeding station, but it is highly discouraged for urban beekeepers who keep hives within a city.