

A honeybee's life is not all sweetness and light. Sarah McFadden talks to a beekeeper about her tuned-in, stressed-out, hard-working charges

Signals from the hive

“Einstein said – or he’s said to have said – that if bees disappeared, mankind would starve,” Christina Stadlbauer tells me over mint tea in a lively downtown breakfast spot. I hadn’t known about Einstein’s pronouncement, but what Stadlbauer had to say next rang a bell: “If pollination doesn’t happen, plants don’t reproduce; you don’t have flowers, you don’t have seeds, it’s finished. Bees are at the beginning of the food chain.”

One-third of the world’s food crops, we’re told, rely on pollination by insects, and honeybees are the unchallenged champions in that line of work. Although their extinction would probably not precipitate the collapse of the entire food chain, as Einstein is said to have said it would, (self-pollinating and wind-pollinated crops would likely survive), it would decimate a good chunk of it. Countless flowering plant species and the animals which feed on them, and the animals which feed on those animals, would disappear, culminating in biological disaster. Needless to say, there would be no more honey.

Honeybees are still with us, but they’re in trouble. Over the last four years, they have been dying off in alarming numbers in Europe and North America. Beekeepers have identified a wide range of immediate causes, but the underlying problem appears to be a severe weakening of the insects’ immune systems. Some place the blame on environmental stress, which has been linked to industrial beekeeping practices, pesticides, air pollution and a long list of similar ecological sins.

Interest in sustainable, non-commercial beekeeping has redoubled as the current epidemic, dubbed ‘colony collapse disorder’, or CCD, has reached crisis proportions. And it has developed in tandem with popular enthusiasm for all manner of city-greening initiatives. Thus, urban beekeeping, which was common in Brussels until the 1950s, is making a comeback.



CHRISTINA STADLBAUER

Christina Stadlbauer, an Austrian-Italian Shiatsu practitioner and Naikan meditation facilitator with a PhD in chemistry and a passion for medicinal plants, is part of the revival.

Among the many good reasons for taking up beekeeping, Stadlbauer’s stands out. She was terrified of bees. “I never liked insects – especially flying insects. Bees, of course, are especially unpleasant because they sting.” That was the view she held

when she discovered shelves filled with books about bees in a friend’s guestroom library, where she was spending the night. She began reading them. The next morning, she learned that her friend’s father was a beekeeper. “I began asking him all sorts of questions, so he invited me to go along with him to visit the hives. He gave me a protective suit to wear, and I stood there stiffly, watching what was going on. I said to myself ‘If you look at the bees in detail, if you take the time and actually look at what you’re afraid of, it makes it easier; it makes the sensation bearable.’ That’s how I got interested, and now I’m a beekeeper myself. It’s like auto-psychotherapy. My fear has not completely vanished, but by looking

closely, I really managed to overcome the horror I felt.”

Stadlbauer is made of tougher fibre than some of the rest of us, who would no sooner test ourselves against our phobias than admit to them in public. Still, her visceral aversion was pitted against an intellectual attraction. The latter won out, and was soon complemented by admiration, respect, fascination and,

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60 apiculture

yes, affection for creatures she once found repellent. Today, Stadlbauer is hooked on bees.

"When I moved to Brussels in 2008, I heard about a beekeepers' association which gives classes and lets students set up hives in their garden." Happy to have taken the two-year course, she ended up not needing their garden, since experimental arts organisations Okno and Nadine offered Stadlbauer space for her bees at their city-centre locations. She now has two hives in Nadine's edenic flower and vegetable garden, which has been salvaged from wasteland in the middle of Schaerbeek. The garden doesn't necessarily look like a laboratory, but it is used as one by artists and urbanists with horticultural leanings.

Stadlbauer's brightly painted hives are at the far end. Bees fly in and out, heading not for the shady garden but for a large wild plant with wisteria-like blooms that has sprouted in the ruins of an abandoned parking area nearby. "The bees love those flowers," Stadlbauer says.

Honey

City bees, she tells me, visit parks and cemeteries, empty lots and *soigné* roof terraces, where they enjoy a veritable smorgasbord. "The honey they make depends on the flowers they find. In the city, bees often find exotic plants growing in private gardens and on balconies. So urban honey is very complex, with lots of layers of taste, whereas in the countryside you often have monofloral honey made from the nectar of just one plant variety that's cultivated over a large area. Some people say that urban honey is less polluted than honey from the countryside because pesticides aren't used in the city. But there is no scientific evidence on this yet.

"In a good year, a strong hive can produce fifty kilos of honey. Otherwise, it's more like ten kilos." Information found on Stadlbauer's website helps put this yield in perspective. A honeybee, it says, must visit 100 apple blossoms in order to fill its tiny honey stomach (that term designates the reservoir in which the bee carries nectar back to the hive). And this: one bee produces less than one-quarter of a teaspoon of honey in its lifetime. "Since I have known this," she adds, "a little prayer of respect always escapes me in the presence of honey."

Buzz off

"Bees are very sensitive to electromagnetic waves," Stadlbauer says. "Mobile phones and wireless networks disturb them. It's difficult to test this because every colony is different, but urban beekeepers



SARAH MCFADDEN

Urban beekeeper: Christina Stadlbauer checks on her colonies at Nadine, in Schaerbeek

See the bees

Nadine
80 Rue Gallait, Brussels,
open Thursday, 14.00
to 20.00, and every first
Saturday of the month, 14.00
to 18.00. Tel 02.248.20.35,
www.nadine.be

Beekeeping classes

(in French)
SRABE (Société Royale
d'Apiculture de Bruxelles et
ses Environs) www.api.bxl.be

Recommended reading

The Barefoot Beekeeper,
by Phil Chandler, and
Chandler's website
www.biobees.com

have to consider this a little bit. There is so much stuff around.

"Bees are also extremely sensitive to smells. They don't like animal odours – pigs, cows, dogs. If a farmer milks his cows just before going to visit his bees, he will get stung. He should take care of the cows, then take a shower, and then go to see the bees. Even if you're not around animals but you sweat a lot, you should take a shower before visiting the bees. But don't put on perfume, because it confuses them. Bees find flowers by colour, but also by their fragrance.

Stadlbauer is genuinely fond of her honeybees. "Not of the individual bees – they're so tiny, and there are far too many to name. In the summer a strong hive has about 60,000 bees. But you become fond of the colony. Each colony has its own character, which comes from the queen. She lays all the eggs, so the bees inherit something of her character. No two colonies behave in the same way.

"The social life of bees is incredibly complex and interesting. Everything is controlled. It has taken us years to understand even this much. I learn something every day about bees. They know what they're doing."

And they have much to tell us. Bees are excellent biomonitors. In 2004, honey from hives in central Brussels was tested to measure lead pollution in the city's air; these days, eight airports in Germany regularly test honey collected by local beekeepers for air-borne toxins. Stadlbauer herself would like to conduct a chemical study of urban and rural honey throughout Europe. The process would be translated into artistic form and exhibited in museums so that the project and its implications could be appreciated by a wide public, not just the scientific community. A team of scientists, artists and curators is ready to work with her; all that remains to be secured is, predictably, funding.

Becoming a beekeeper

Now is the time to prepare if you want to start a honeybee colony next spring. "You have to be really ready," Stadlbauer says. Take a course, read and, most importantly, observe the bees. Beekeeping materials don't need to be expensive, and you can count on generous help from fellow beekeepers. They're in it for the honey, not the money. ●