

**Communication de Jonh Coffman, co-chair de Toronto Beekeepers Co-op, prononcée lors de la Journée de l'apiculture urbaine, organisée par le CRAPAUD, tenue à l'UQAM le 11 novembre 2011.**

**Ce texte est publié sur le site du CRAPAUD : [http://www.crapaud.uqam.ca/?page\\_id=1241](http://www.crapaud.uqam.ca/?page_id=1241)**

Urban Beekeeping  
Difficulties and Opportunities  
UQAM Urban Beekeeping Conference

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is John Coffman and I am co-chair of the Toronto Beekeepers Co-op. It is a pleasure to be here in this first Urban Beekeeping Conference at UQAM. This has been a great year for the Co-op. This is our tenth year of keeping bees in the city of Toronto. Also this year the TBC received a Toronto "Live Green" award in the local food production category, recognizing the co-op's outstanding contribution to the greening of Toronto.

Let me first give you a brief introduction to the TBC.

#### Introduction and History of TBC

The main goals of the TBCo-op are to actively manage the beehives under our stewardship, to educate members about bee husbandry and management, and to educate the public about the value of bees to our City's urban landscape and ecosystem. Each year we run a full day "Introduction to Beekeeping" which consistently draws 100+ participants. The Co-op uses Integrated Pest Management and has relied on organic methods, for example, formic acid/sugar dusting/essential oils/sticky boards and screened bottom boards to deal with mites, ventilation/humidity boxes, etc.

The Toronto Beekeepers Co-operative has its origins with a non-for-profit organization called Foodshare, one of whose objectives is to promote urban agriculture. In 2000, Foodshare committed to an experiment in urban beekeeping with hives to be housed at the rear of their building, literally at the convergence of the Gardiner Expressway and the Don Valley Parkway, two large urban freeways. Because the bees had access to the extensive meadows of the Don River Valley floodplain, they did very well at this site.

In 2001, three beehives were established at this location. A small start-up grant was received from Heifer International Foundation which provides funds to initiate small-scale, sustainable urban agriculture projects. With that money, the number of hives was increased to six and a group of seven volunteers and an experienced beekeeper-mentor became the Toronto Beekeeper's Co-operative. In accepting the grant, we were bound by Heifer's philosophy to "pass on the gift" to others, by "gifting" a beehive to another organization at a later time.

We currently have three sites in the city where we manage bees. The main site is at Parc Downsview Park, a recently-established federal park within the city where we have 21 hives. We have had to move our bees several times over the years but I will speak more about this later. Three years ago we “gifted” a hive to the Fairmount Royal York Hotel in downtown Toronto; currently we manage their 6 hives located on the fifteenth floor-level green roof. This year we helped the Toronto Botanical Gardens establish a small apiary by “gifting” a hive to them and they purchased a second colony from a breeder.

Our membership has grown to be about sixty members this past year and all members are expected to have a hand in raising the bees. Our annual honey crop from the Downsview Park site is divided; half goes to our partnering agency, Foodshare, and half to our co-op members. Member shares are tied to their participation in a combination of beeyard hours and educational events.

A more detailed history of the Co-op can be found at our website <http://www.torontobees.ca>.

### Difficulties and Opportunities

The time seems right for the discussion of urban beekeeping. An article this week in Mother Earth News, entitled “The New Beekeeper” says:

*In 2005, though, there was a change on the horizon for the commercial beekeeping world. A sudden decrease in the commercial bee population (now termed CCD) and the lack of bees available for pollination brought lots of attention to the honeybee. Prior to the media focus on the disappearing bees we only heard about bees if a ‘killerbee’ incident grabbed the headlines. Now, suddenly, documentaries, newscasts, and even celebrities were spreading the word about how vital the honeybee is to our food chain and the environment. People began to want to do more to restore pollinator populations, and boost honey bee colony numbers. The attention on honeybees and environment grew with the synergy of awakening environmental consciousness across the spectrum and spawned a new generation of beekeepers. Today we have thousands of backyard beekeepers and environmentally conscious gardeners who not only notice the shortage of bees, they know how to do something about it. Suburbanites, city dwellers and rural agrarians alike found a spot in their backyard, on their rooftop or in their fields and woodlands and began establishing and caring for hives. No longer do we just hear people remark about how their grandpa or great grandpa used to keep bees, those individuals are now keeping the tradition alive and have become beekeepers themselves. Finally, the number of women who have taken up the hive tool is remarkable too. Education and compassion have worked together to bring us The New Beekeeper. The New Beekeeper is our hope for the resurgence of both managed and feral honeybees, all without the use of chemicals to control pests. New beekeepers will be starting tens of thousands of new hives across this country this spring - and there has never been a brighter silver lining to a dark cloud.*

The New Beekeeper by Bee Weaver, Mother Earth News, Nov 10/2011

<http://www.motherearthnews.com/honeybees-beekeeping/the-new-beekeeper.aspx#ixzz1dGL7IUwd>

I would first like to look at some of the difficulties of urban beekeeping in Toronto, some of the problems we have run into and make some observations as to how these may be overcome.

The first major drawback to beekeeping in Toronto is the Ontario Beekeeping Act which states: *“No person shall place hives or leave hives containing bees within 30 metres of a property line separating land on which the hives are placed or left from land occupied as a dwelling or used for a community centre, public park or other place of public assembly or recreation.”*

This act covers all of Ontario; there is no specific municipal bylaw governing the keeping of bees in Toronto. Interestingly enough, our hives are inspected by the province and we have never been told that we are in violation of this law. Enforcing the Bee Act seems to be treated more as a nuisance issue whereby if a neighbour complains about the presence of honeybees, then the beekeeper will be told to remove the hives. If you make good connections with your neighbours and offer a couple of jars of fresh, local honey each season the chances are better that your neighbours will not complain about bees on your property. Several of our members have bees in their back yards or nearby fields. One of our members has hives on the roof of the Canadian Opera Company in the heart of the city as well as on the grounds at Casa Loma, a tourist destination. There is also a semi-commercial beekeeper who has hives on Toronto Island as well as several other sites in the city. University of Toronto has a Beekeeping group with hives on three of the University buildings.

The Ontario Beekeeping Act appears to be one of those laws that really needs to be rethought in terms of the present day urban agricultural movement. It is very similar to the “no urban chickens” by-law that is being challenged in many jurisdictions. Although the Co-op has not actively challenged this law or lobbied for its change, in our public education program, we do try to raise the need for either a City bylaw or a change to the Act.

A related issue that is not mentioned often is the scepticism of rural commercial beekeepers towards the urban beekeeper. There is the misconception that urban beekeepers are not as professional or as careful as rural apiarists. With the recent introduction of the Small Hive Beetle into south western Ontario, a rumour started that it was Detroit city beekeeping that advanced that spread. Challenging these sorts of misconceptions will be essential if the Ontario Beekeepers Act is to be amended to include beekeeping in urban centres.

The second major difficulty I would say would be the public misunderstanding of “bees” and the notion that these are dangerous creatures. We do a lot of public education events at urban fairs, farmer’s markets, and schools and one of the main perceptions we hear about honeybees is that they sting and are dangerous. People so often confuse honeybees with wasps and hornets and need to be educated to the fact that honeybees are not aggressive insects. We have an observation hive that we take to our events and sometimes people are reluctant at first to even approach the bees in this environment. It is

the children who are the most fascinated and willing to come close to the bees and then draw in the adults. Sometimes, if we are giving a seminar near our apiary, we may have a honeybee visit us and are able to demonstrate that these girls are not interested in stinging but can be let to walk on your hand with no trouble. These are the valuable “teaching moments” that help debunk the myth of the aggressive bees. Suiing up bureaucrats and taking them into the beeyard to experience honeybees firsthand has also proven effective.

In dealing with the city bureaucracy, this notion of the aggressive bee is one of the biggest hurdles to deal with. Most often fear of lawsuits stemming from people being stung is the reason given for not allowing hives on city-owned property. Some time ago, Toronto City Hall indicated they wanted a couple of beehives on their green roof, but five years later there are still no bees on the roof. This is despite the fact that 1) green roofs and pollinator gardens are already visited by many varieties of stinging native pollinators and 2) we are covered through the Ontario Beekeepers Association liability insurance as individual beekeepers and as a beekeeping co-op.

Another difficulty we have seen as a Co-op in placing our bees in the city is accessibility and long range commitment. It seems many businesses and organizations are eager for bees on their properties but these partnerships have to be considered very carefully by both parties from a number of angles. There has to be some understanding by the host organization as to the responsibilities and demands of running an apiary. They need to understand that this is an agricultural project not just caring for pet bees. Physical accessibility (especially easy access to rooftop apiaries), accommodating realistic hours of operation, division of honey shares, liability issues, and ownership, [shared or one owner] are some of the issues that need to be considered. As well, the long range plans of the host organization need to be considered so you do not have to constantly move your bees.

As an example of the need for serious long range planning here is one of our experiences. Due to expropriation of the Foodshare site, the Co-op was forced to find a new location. We negotiated with a community environmental organization, Evergreen, to locate our hives on an historical brickworks site they were re-developing. They were very keen to have honeybees as part of their project.

At the Evergreen Brickworks location we were at first located in a large fenced-in, ground level location. This was perfect since it abutted a large parkland with lots of native flowers and trees and a large pond, and allowed easy access and unlimited participation of the members as well as an observation area for visitors to the yard. A year later, we had to move within the Evergreen site because construction was beginning in our location.

Evergreen proposed a rooftop site for our bees. This meant that they had to first of all construct a scaffolding staircase to allow us get on to the roof since the inside access was too small and too difficult to get equipment up or down and even difficult for some members to negotiate. Then they had to erect guardrails around the edge for protection.

The size of the rooftop limited the number of members that could look after the bees so we had to work in shifts to allow members to be able to get the experience with the hives that they wanted. At some point smokers were banned since smoke was being drawn into an office below. Both moving hives to the rooftop and removing the harvested honey supers, we had to make use of a sky (aerial) forklift.

After a season there we found this site very inadequate for several other reasons. There were large air conditioners on the roof which caused a lot of vibration which disturbed the bees; one of the air intakes for the AC was directly in the path of the bees flight and many were being sucked into it. The roof was very hot and unsheltered, again, not ideal for the bees as well as the co-op volunteers. Finally, Evergreen had a huge construction plan that meant constant dust and noise and large heavy equipment constantly shaking the building, disturbing the bees. The bees told us they were not happy there by having about a half dozen swarms that spring.

One of the opportunities in the Evergreen location was that there was a large weekly farmers' market and we often participated in this with our observation hive and were able to point out to people that our bees were right there on the roof next to the market and proved no danger to the many shoppers.

Another insight this experience gave us was that even though this was an environmental organization and they appeared very keen on having bees as part of their operation, going to some lengths to make our rooftop workable, I think they saw this as a nice concept rather than looking closely at the commitment that was needed for a viable apiary.

Our move to Parc Downsview Park from the Evergreen site has so far proven quite successful. Part of PDP's vision is to create an urban agricultural centre in the park and we fit into that plan. The apiary site is at ground level near a couple acres of market/community gardens, sheltered by a small grove of sumacs and is not readily visible to passersby. Foodshare funded the building of a hexagonal-shaped fenced yard. The plan is to eventually move to a new urban orchard at the south end of the park once it is established. The co-op has unlimited access to the site and the park has basically taken a hands-off approach.

As part of our agreement with the Park we commit to doing a number of educational programs and workshops and participate in many of the environmental school programs and events that the park runs out of its Learning Centre. This is a very unique opportunity giving us educational time with hundreds of school children and adults in the community.

With the Royal York Hotel, our agreement for managing the hives was never really clearly negotiated. The initial idea came from the head Chef inviting the Co-op to have hives near his rooftop garden. We do the majority of the work and the Hotel reaps all the benefits of the honey harvest which, understandably, creates some dissatisfaction among co-op members. This site however has given the Co-op a great deal of publicity since it appeared to be a unique arrangement having honeybees on the fifteenth floor of a large downtown hotel. Several of the hotels in the Fairmont chain have now adopted bees on

their rooftops. The bees seem to be doing quite well at this location. They are able to forage out along the waterfront of Lake Ontario as well as help pollinate the rooftop garden run by the hotel restaurant.

With our hives at the Botanical Gardens we have a three year plan whereby we train their members over the years, and then turn the operation over to them completely at the end of that period. Since this is only our first year, we will see how this works out. Our participation at the TBG has offered us another venue for education at their weekly farmers' market.

The fact that there is a cosmetic pesticide ban in the city of Toronto works to our advantage. Although our co-op does not sell our honey we are always asked by people who attend our workshops and taste our honey where they can buy it. Many people are looking for pesticide free agriculture products and city collected honey provides that product. There is also the diversity of flora in the city; parks, backyard gardens, fruit trees and bushes, as well as the multitude of flower gardens that provide a great forage resource for honeybees. In terms of economic opportunities, the urban beekeeper could supply the need for very local honey with a unique "Terroir."

In cities where space can be very limited, bees are an ideal livestock, taking up very little space and are ideal for vertical farming situations (rooftops, etc). Cities are also act as heat islands, allowing the bees to be active longer. With the lack of pesticides, the diversity of forage and the fact that the urban bees are usually kept in one location and not moved about as is the case with large migratory beekeeping, the health of the bee population I believe is enhanced.

One of the greatest opportunities for urban beekeepers I feel is the increased interest in pollinators and honeybees in the school system. Some of the high schools in Toronto are developing gardening and agricultural programs and along with this should come beekeeping courses and the importance of honeybees in pollination. Many of the schools have large properties or great rooftops that would be ideal for having a couple of hives. Although I see this as an opportunity, I have yet to see it really taking place but I know that there is certainly interest and I hope that the education programs provided by the Co-op would help to initiate a move in this direction.

Beekeeping in the city provides an opportunity to partner with a lot of different groups and individuals in different ways. We have been involved in garden shows, Seedy Saturday, Pollinator events, Slow Food/Terra Madre tasting events, farmers markets, urban agriculture bus tours, urban orchard harvest festivals, small livestock workshops, and art shows. We go to schools or school groups come to us. All of these events give us many opportunities to promote the possibility of viable urban beekeeping.

The rising interest in urban agriculture, the proliferation of community, market and backyard gardens as well as concern for our environment and food security should all prove opportunities for urban beekeeping.

