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Urban buzz, bees in the city

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In the heart of downtown Port Chester in southern Westchester, the summer sun beats down on the black tar roof of Tarry Market on North Main Street. Just 500 feet away, the Metro North train speeds by as beekeeper Meg Paska steps onto the roof and carefully approaches two boxy towers of bee hives. She lifts one frame carpeted with a thick, crusty honeycomb while small, hairy honey bees nibble at the opaque combs. They don't seem to mind Paska's blunt edged knife shearing away glistening clumps of the sugary stuff.

"We have to clean out the nectar--or the 'pre-honey'--because it clogs the frames," she says.

Paska is one of a growing number of passionate beekeepers intent on bringing the magic of the honeybee (Apis mellifera) to cities and towns by setting up hives on rooftops, terraces, backyards or porches. "In an urban environment, beekeeping is great for people with spatial constraints," Paska says. "It's a wonderful opportunity to look at nature and take yourself out of the craziness of the city."

The surge in popularity of urban beekeeping comes from the convergence of such movements as locavore, food sustainability, urban farming and gardening. The trend was also fueled by the disappearance of massive numbers of honey bee colonies due to colony collapse disorder. Veteran and novice beekeepers alike took on a rescue mission to keep the species alive. Urban beekeeping also got a boost in 2012 when First Lady Michelle Obama installed a hive on the south side of the White House lawn (there now are three). And a good dose of bee PR promoting bees as friendly and nonaggressive came with the blockbuster movie The Secret Life of Bees, based on Sue Monk Kidd's novel.

Paska, who lives in New York City, has taught beekeeping classes at both the Bronx and Manhattan Botanical Gardens. She was contacted by Elizabeth Meltz, director of sustainability for the Batali Bastianich Hospitality Group, (which owns the Tarry Lodge restaurant in Port Chester and the recently opened Tarry Market)

about a year and a half ago. Meltz wanted to start keeping bees. "We wanted to keep bees wherever we could," Meltz says. "The market [roof] afforded us our first opportunity, and we started last year."

The first year was successful, Meltz says. "The honey was delicious. When you broke open the comb, the honey came pouring out and the bees were landing on you while you ate. It was pretty amazing." Tarry Market initially sold whole combs and plans on selling them again later in the season.

With the former Life Saver building in the background, Paska shows her bee apprentice and Tarry Market staffer, Nick O'Keefe, how to gently smoke the hives to drive the bees down a few frames so she can access the combs. "We started with about 10 to 15,000 bees, but I expect that number to grow to about 80,000 or more," she says. "We produced about 80 pounds of honey last year and it's as close to organic honey as you can get."

Unlike rural beekeepers, urban beekeeping poses a different set of challenges. Providing water is a key concern, especially if bees are on exposed, heat-producing rooftops. On a daily basis, a bee colony will use a quart or more of water, which may not be close by. Also, without fields of goldenrod, clover or purple loosestrife, city honeybees need to travel farther for their source of pollen and nectar.

"We have some great trees in [New York City] and it's what the bees need to survive," says Grai Rice, co-founder of HoneyBeeLives, a New Paltz-based group. "Bees will forage early in the spring and fall and will travel two miles or more seeking nectar. Any greater distance will wear out a bee's wings."

Essential to a hive's success is managing a swarm--when bees leave their hive en masse to establish a new colony. Although a natural phenomena, most people panic when they see a large group of bees settle in a tree or in a house soffit. "You have to be pro-active and have more responsibility to your bees," Rice explains. "They are an intensely vibrant life force and when they swarm in densely populated areas, people freak out--they don't understand the beauty and gentleness of the swarm."

Frightened by a swarm on his pear tree recently, a Red Hook man desperately contacted a local pest control company that wanted $500 to spray and kill the bees. Then he called Poughkeepsie beekeeper Marie Celeste Edwards to come and rescue the bees. The swarm was huge—about 50,000 bees—and Edwards quickly and expediently collected them in a box. "The swarm would've been gone in 24 hours anyway--they were just scouting locations for a new home," Edwards says. "It was so simple: The Queen bee was in the middle of the big cluster and the worker bees were around her." Edwards took them back to her hives and happily watched them acclimate and settle in.

Organic gardener and beekeeper Marty Rosen lessens the swarm activity of her four hives at her Piermont home by manually moving the queen bee to a new location. "I take a bit of the whole hive and divide it three ways and move the old queen with the honey and put her in a new hive. Now there are three hives where there used to be one."

Rosen says she has a lot of respect for the bees as pollinators in her garden. "The main focus is having a chemical-free apiary with bees that can naturally resist disease and be able to make it through a nor'easter. That means that they can feed themselves on their honey through the winter without supplements or sugar water." Rosen's interest in the honey her bees produce is minimal; she tries to have enough to give her neighbors so they can appreciate the bees, but leaves the rest for the bees to survive the winter.

Let It Bee Apiaries was started by Christine Lehner and her husband Charles Branch, who both became enamored with bees about six years ago. After taking classes and workshops and researching beekeeping, they set up their own hives at their home in Hastings. Their success was noted by friends and neighbors, who offered their homes as a place for more hives. Urban hives often do better than hives in rural areas "mainly because of the heavy use of pesticides in agricultural areas. Even though people use pesticides in their gardens in Hastings, they are [using] less and less," Lehner explains.

Today, Let It Bee Apiaries maintains hives in Irvington, Rye, Bedford and at Lyndhurst, the historic, castled site in Tarrytown. Their honey is sold at farmers' markets and at specialty shops like DeCicco Family Market, AHAlife, Geordanes and Murray's Cheese. The honey sells for about $6 for a 9-ounce jar and $8 for a 12-ounce jar.

"We are really a small operation and do everything ourselves," Lehner says—he estimates that 900 pounds of honey would be produced this year. "We have a very limited supply--I often wish we had more honey to sell."

Much has been written about the social superiority of bees and how these highly functioning, fuzzy insects can model what would be exemplary human behavior. "Observing the inside of a hive gives us an opportunity to watch these social insects," says Lehner. "We watch them nurse, feeding the eggs, bringing and depositing the pollen. When they swarm, they all decide together and they all 'agree' to find a new place."

Honeybees, as docile as they are, have become a political issue in some Hudson Valley cities. Believing swarming bees were a dangerous nuisance, urban lawmakers long ago sought to outlaw bees, leaving a legacy of antiquated ordinances that prohibit keeping bees and "barnyard" animals such as chickens and goats. When Edwards first established her hives at her Poughkeepsie home, they were on a terraced hill overlooking the county sheriff's office. The first thing she did was to find out if there was an ordinance against beekeeping (there wasn't). New York City gave the green light to beekeepers only two years ago, but the city's northern neighbor, Yonkers, isn't quite there yet--beekeepers there, concerned about repercussions from the city and from their neighbors, declined interviews for this article.

"We are trying to make it legal," says Chuck Lesnick, Yonkers City Council President, who introduced legislation that eventually will permit beekeeping. "The new ordinance will deal with issues such as where bees can be kept--on a single-family residence or on rooftops of multiple-family units." Lesnick, who estimates that there are about a

dozen beekeepers in Yonkers, says he hopes the new ordinance goes into effect by this winter.

"My neighbor has bees and it makes me smile when I see them come over to my yard and pollinate my garden," he says. "I think Einstein said that bees are imperative in nature and without them, we probably wouldn't be here."