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The buzz on urban bees

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GREEN CITY One would hardly even notice there was a beehive in the garden behind the Mission District's Kaliflower Collective, except for the winged traffic shuttling industriously between the four-tiered bee box and the fruit trees flowering just overhead.

It's not easy to imagine, given the scant handful of visible bees, that as many as 50,000 bees might be contained within the modest hive which, at less than two feet square and about three feet tall, looks as innocuous and unthreatening as a stack of closet organizers. It's also hard, in this tranquil setting, to fully appreciate the crisis situation of colony collapse disorder (CCD), which has been quietly decimating honeybee populations nationwide since 2006. Some beekeepers report up to 90 percent losses. Since bees are responsible for pollinating a wide variety of urban plants — from fruit trees to garden veggies, from clover to cactus — beekeeping is more than a curious hobby. It's an essential link in the chain of life as we know it.

The even-keeled behavior of San Francisco's backyard bees is appreciated by most urban beekeepers. Roger Meier, a Castro District-based beekeeper whose home-produced honey appears in several local markets under the label Mint Hill, admits that despite their proven usefulness in city settings, the idea of kept bees can cause some consternation among the uninitiated. Swarming bees in search of a new hive (such as a recent incident in the Mission reported on SFist.com) is cited as a cause for alarm by nervous neighbors.

"It's pretty frightening to wake up and find a big swarm of bees in your backyard if you don't know much about them," Meier says. His neighbors have come to appreciate his honey-making habit over the years, not to mention their own well-pollinated apple trees, which he calls "happy with fruit." That Meier, like most experienced beekeepers, actively maintains his hives to prevent swarming also helps keep potential public relations problems in check.

Since swarms mainly occur when a hive gets overcrowded, Meier and his fellow apiculturists monitor the population growth of each hive and split their broods into empty bee boxes when necessary — a process known as "forced swarming." Despite these precautions, swarms can occur, but people are urged not to panic or reach for the Raid. Instead, the San Francisco Beekeepers Association offers removal referrals on its Web site, www.sfbee.org, and many urban beekeepers are happy to inherit a new brood.

Peter Sinton, president of the association, estimates there to be around 60 active beekeepers in a club with a membership of 171, a number that seems initially low until you consider that most beekeepers run multiple hives. Kept bees can be found across the area in backyards, rooftops,

community gardens, the Alemany Farm, and the Crystal Springs watershed. Spreading the bee population over far-flung neighborhoods is one way to ensure the continued survival of diverse flora and means that even if the beekeeper loses one or two hives to infestation, infection, or CCD, there will be some survivors.

It's not just a passion for pollination that brings nascent beekeepers into the fold. Nancy Ellis, animal exhibit coordinator at the Randall Museum, began her journey into apiculture when she became responsible for the upkeep of the museum's exhibit hive. Nearly nine years later, she cares for four hives in various locations and bottles her honey harvests under the label Bee Bop. She waxes somewhat rhapsodic on the unique benefits of honey: "It's bactericidal, like Neosporin," she explains, "and its chemical makeup keeps it from spoiling or getting moldy." Another unique benefit of honey is its reported effect on sufferers of pollen allergies, whom Ellis encourages to take a small dose of locally-produced honey per day to "inoculate" themselves against the allergens present in surrounding flora.

But it's not just the medicinal that lures folks into apiculture. Suzi Palladino, youth program and compost education manager at the Garden for the Environment, cites her interest in urban sustainability and self-sufficiency as key to her forays into apiculture. Peter Sinton refers to the meditative state his beekeeping encourages.

"Handling bees is like tai chi," he says. "Do it with calm and grace, and bees usually do not get riled up."

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