

The Art of Beekeeping in an Urban Environment

Wilk Apiary manages urban and rural beehives across New York State to produce natural, local honey

With bee populations in sharp decline across the world, urban beekeeping has flourished in the last decade. Beekeeping has become hugely popular in metropolises like New York City, where registered beehives have quadrupled since beekeeping was legalized in 2010.

Tom Wilk, of Wilk Apiary Inc., started his first hive in a community garden in Long Island City, Queens, in 2012 after taking an introductory course in beekeeping at the New York City Beekeepers Association. It was the book *The Backyard Beekeeper* by Kim Flottum—a read suggested by a Putnam County farmer—that sparked his interest to learn more.

Nowadays he is one of the most respected beekeepers in the city. He has been running the NYC Honey Festival since 2017, founded the Queens Beekeepers Guild in 2018, and earned his Master Beekeeper Certification from Cornell University a year later. Currently, this one-man-band tends nine apiaries with 53 hives in different locations across New York State—13 of them in the city, in venues ranging from a school to a brewery and a private backyard. “One major issue I see is that there are too many hives

too close together for the urban environment to support,” says Wilk. “Another problem is most people who start to keep bees don’t really understand what they need to do. If one beekeeper within five kilometers (three miles) of your hives gets diseases in their hives, they can spread them to your apiary, even though you manage them to be disease-free.”

Honeybees play a crucial role in natural ecosystems, and it is estimated that one-third of the U.S. food supply relies on them for pollination. Unfortunately, their populations are vanishing at alarming rates. Colony collapse disorder (CCD), a mysterious phenomenon in which worker bees abandon their hives, is often cited as a cause, as are pesticides, pathogens, and monoculture, which limits the forage supplies for bees.

“In the city, you worry less about pesticide use and you don’t have to worry about monoculture—there is a wide variety of flowers the honeybees can go to for nutrition,” says Wilk. “The main source is when the trees bloom, as one nice-sized tree can have close to half-a-million flowers.” In his urban apiaries, he hopes for 13.5 kilograms (30 pounds) of honey per hive, but his suburban hives can sometimes produce up to 45 kilograms (100 pounds). However, some don’t produce enough extra honey to harvest.

Wilk’s hive work, scattered across the city, is distinctly seasonal. While in the winter he

