

Beekeeping in Denver Urban Gardens Community Gardens

In November 2008, the Denver City Council adopted an ordinance allowing backyard beekeeping in Denver. DUG strongly supports this policy and believes community gardens will be excellent locations for hives. We expect that urban beekeeping will increase the number of beneficial pollinators in our gardens and provide more local whole food for Denver residents. Honeybees, on which we rely for the pollination of a large proportion of our food, are dying in large numbers due to "colony collapse disorder" (CCD). The causes of CCD are not fully understood, but it may be the result of a "perfect storm" of stresses on the honeybee, including mites and parasites, pesticides that interfere with the bees' navigation skills, and the unnatural conditions in which many commercial hives are kept. Small-scale urban beekeeping allows bees to live in more natural conditions, so each new hive will help to protect this vital part of our ecosystem. Just as each community garden makes a small but significant contribution to the health, diversity, and sustainability of our food system, keeping a beehive is a way for a small group of people to make a difference on a big environmental issue.

If the gardeners in your community garden want to host honey bees, DUG encourages you to either (1) Arrange with a local beekeeper to place and maintain a hive or two in the garden, or (2) Start a hive to be maintained by the gardeners themselves.

For community gardens that are considering beekeeping, DUG has developed the following guidelines for complying with the new ordinance, starting a hive, and maintaining good relations within the garden and with the surrounding neighborhood. Please follow these steps to get started:

1. Call Denver Urban Gardens

If you are interested in hosting a beehive in your community garden, please call DUG (303·292·9900). DUG staff will:

- Determine if the beekeeping ordinance applies to your garden. The ordinance allows beekeeping only in certain zone districts (see the text of the ordinance on the last page). DUG will let you know whether your garden is in one of these zone districts. If it's not, you may still be able to have a beehive, but you'll need to apply for a zoning variance. DUG will help you navigate that process.
- Discuss the issue with the owner of the property where your garden is located in order to get approval to place a hive there.
- Meet with you to determine if your community garden is a good place for a beehive and help you decide the best place to put the hive in the community garden.

The community garden should designate one gardener or a group of gardeners to manage the beehive in your community garden. They will be responsible for making sure the hive is maintained properly and removing the hive if necessary.

2. Know and follow the limitations in the beekeeping ordinance

The ordinance establishes a few rules for beehives, mainly designed to minimize accidental contact between bees and neighbors. The language of the ordinance is written in the context of a residential lot, so it is not entirely clear how it applies to a community garden. The following guidelines attempt to apply the spirit of the ordinance to the placement of hives in a community garden.

Number of hives

The ordinance allows no more than two hives per zone lot. Many community gardens encompass more than one lot, but DUG believes it is prudent not to start more than two hives in any community garden.

Placement of hives

The ordinance requires hives to be placed in the rear 1/3 of the lot, at least five feet from the side and rear property lines. It may be difficult to apply this provision literally in a community garden, but DUG encourages gardeners to place hives in an inconspicuous location as far as possible from sidewalks and other public areas, and at least five feet from any property line.

Barriers

The ordinance requires hives to be placed "so that the bees must fly over a six-foot barrier, which may be vegetative, before leaving the property". Make sure your community garden has a hedge or fence at least six feet high between the beehive and the property line.

Storage of equipment

The ordinance prohibits the outdoor storage of bee paraphernalia or hive materials. All beekeeping equipment, especially empty hive parts that may attract pests, should be kept in the community toolbox or shed.

3. Be a good neighbor

In addition to the legal requirements of the ordinance, DUG believes that beehives will be more successful in community gardens if some additional steps are taken to keep everyone happy – the gardeners, the neighbors, and the bees.

Consensus among affected people

Before installing a hive in a community garden, make sure you have:

- Worked with DUG to get permission from the property owner where the community garden is located;
- Obtained the consent of all gardeners in the community garden; and
- Notified nearby neighbors.

If some gardeners or neighbors are resistant to the idea of a beehive in the community garden, try to arrange a meeting with them to discuss their concerns and provide information. Explain that many bees visit the community garden and neighborhood already and that honeybees rarely sting when they're out foraging. Tell them about the safeguards

in the ordinance and your efforts to reduce the chance of accidental contact between bees and people. If you still don't have unanimous support among the gardeners, your community garden may not be a good place for a hive.

Stings and allergies

Honeybees generally sting only to defend their hive. They rarely sting when out foraging. So gardeners are unlikely to be stung unless they are working with the bees directly in the hive. But you should be prepared if someone gets stung in the community garden and has an adverse reaction. For most people, stings produce a mild reaction with some pain and localized swelling. Some people experience stronger reactions, like swelling of the whole arm. Benadryl can provide relief from these symptoms.

A very small number of people have a dangerous allergy to bee stings and can go into anaphylactic shock if stung. If this happens, an EpiPen can provide a life-saving dose of epinephrine. An EpiPen is available by prescription only and is dangerous if used improperly, so it should not be left unattended in a community garden. The best course is to identify any gardeners or neighbors with a severe allergy and encourage them to obtain and keep an EpiPen if they do not already have one.

Aggressive bees

When starting a hive, choose a "race" of bees bred for gentleness (see the [Resources section](#) for more information). If your initially gentle bees start to become aggressive, you can "requeen" to reintroduce more friendly stock.

Sweetness & light

Most importantly, share some of the honey from the hive with the neighbors! They will be more likely to support you if they benefit from the hive.

4. Getting started

Once you're in compliance with the ordinance and have the support of the gardeners and neighbors, you're ready to start beekeeping! You'll need to decide what type of hive to have – the traditional white-box Langstroth or a simpler, less expensive top bar hive – and whether to buy one or build it yourself. To begin learning about beekeeping, take a class and read some books on natural beekeeping. The [Resources section](#) lists local beekeeping classes, some good books, and websites where you can learn more about organic beekeeping, download free plans to build a top bar hive, and find the supplies and equipment you may need.

The most important thing you need, of course, is bees! New beekeepers can get bees in several ways:

- Capture a swarm. When homeowners notice a swarm of bees on their property, they often call local beekeepers to come and collect them. You can get on the "swarm list" by calling [name and number to be added].
- Obtain a split from an existing hive. A local beekeeper who is ready to split a hive may be willing to share some bees.
- Buy a package of bees with a queen. See the [Resources section](#) for local suppliers.

5. Maintaining a beehive

Once your hive is up and running, it needs occasional maintenance. See the [Resources section](#) for books and websites. A few more suggestions:

- Keep a source of water (e.g. a large bowl with some floating sticks for the bees to land on) within 20 feet of the hive. Bees need water, and providing them with a source makes them less likely to visit in neighbors' kiddie pools and birdbaths.
- Plant plenty of bee-friendly plants in your community garden plot and in common areas of the garden. For a list of good plants for Colorado that attract bees, see the [Resources section](#).
- Go organic! As with vegetable gardening, beekeeping in DUG community gardens should follow organic practices, and the use of chemical medications and treatments in beehives is prohibited. For information on organic beekeeping methods, see the [Resources section](#).
- Sometimes, a large number of the bees in a hive will leave to look for a place to start a new colony. This is a “swarm”. When bees swarm, they often cluster on a nearby bush or tree branch while scout bees look for a good location for a permanent home. The huge number of bees clustered together makes an impressive sight, but bees are usually not aggressive while in a swarm, so it is not a cause for alarm. However, if possible the swarm should be captured and placed in a managed hive, so the bees do not move into a wall or attic of a nearby house. If your bees swarm, call DUG or a beekeeper who collects swarms (see the [Resources section](#).)

6. Removing a beehive

A beehive that is not properly maintained can become a nuisance. DUG reserves the right to require the gardeners or local beekeeper responsible for a hive to remove it from the community garden if necessary.

Beekkeeping Resources

Classes

Workshops with Marty Hardison at Delaney Urban Farm (www.dug.org)
Backyard Hive in Eldorado Springs (www.backyardhive.com)

Books and websites

Natural Beekeeping: Organic Approaches to Modern Apiculture, by Ross Conrad
The Art & Adventure of Beekeeping, by Ormond Abei
The Appropriate Beehive: An Introduction to Topbar Beekeeping, by Marty Hardison
(available for download through DUG)
The Barefoot Beekeeper, by P. J. Chandler, available at www.biobees.com. This site also
has an active discussion forum on top-bar beekeeping.
Organic beekeeping Yahoo! group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Organicbeekeepers>
Topbar hive Yahoo! group: <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/TopHive>

Mentors

Call DUG or contact Marygael Meister at the Denver Beekeepers Association
(marygael@gmail.com, www.denverbee.org) to get paired with an experienced beekeeper
to help you.

Bees

You can order a package of bees from the Denver Beekeepers Association
(www.denverbee.org) and Growing Gardens in Boulder (www.growinggardens.org).

Swarms

If your bees swarm, contact a beekeeper to collect them:
<http://www.denverbee.org/bees/swarms.cfm>
<http://www.ebeehoney.com/zCO.html>

Letter to neighbors should include information on the benefits of beekeeping, how to
distinguish honeybees from more aggressive stinging insects like wasps and hornets, and
contact information for questions and concerns

Denver's Beekeeping Ordinance

Denver Municipal Code

Sec. 59-87. Accessory uses allowed.

(a) General. Any use, which complies with the conditions listed in this section, may be operated as an accessory use to a use by right, a use exception, a conditional use or a use by special review, unless specifically prohibited by this subsection. In this subsection the term "use by right" also includes these three (3) other types of uses. Some zone districts allow certain specific accessory uses as listed below. Accessory uses need not be enclosed, unless specifically stated herein.

(b) Residential and business zone districts.

c. Specific accessory uses allowed for residential uses located in the RS-4, R-0, R-1, R-2, R-2-A, R-2-B, R-3, R-3-X, R-4, R-4-X, R-MU-20, R-MU-30, MS-1, MS-2, MS-3 or R-X zone districts.

(Ord. No. 660-05, § 4, eff. 9-16-05)

2. Number and kinds of animals accessory to dwelling units. See the following chart.

Kind of Animal	Permitted number
Domestic honey bees	2 hives per zone lot; hives must be in rear 1/3 of zone lot with a five-foot setback from side and rear zone lot lines; the hives must be screened so that the bees must fly over a six-foot barrier, which may be vegetative, before leaving the property; no outdoor storage of any bee paraphernalia or hive materials not being used as a part of a hive.

(Ord. No. 621-08, § 1, eff. 11-21-08)