



Eva Crane Trust

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TYPESCRIPT: Beekeeping and gardens

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[* indicates an entry for this term]

Beekeeping and gardens

An enclosed garden has been closely connected with beekeeping since early times, and nowadays many hobby beekeepers throughout the world keep a few hives in their gardens where the bees can forage on nearby flowers.

In the 700s BC the ruler of Assyria said that he brought bees down from the mountains, and he and his gardeners knew how to deal with the honey and wax. In Ancient Rome the garden was regarded as the best place for hives because they were protected from wind, farm animals and thieves; the hives should face south or south-east. From the 16th century onwards, beekeeping books gave similar advice, and some authors suggested plants to grow for bees. In *The Feminine Monarchie* (1609), Charles Butler wrote that if there were many hives a special area should be set aside, but for a few, 'your Garden of Hearbs and Flowers will serve'. He advised that hives should be within sight of the house so that swarms could be watched for. In the gardens of large houses the hives were often put near the vegetable garden or *orchard, and in cottagers' gardens they were usually near the house, and might be looked after by the housewife. *J. C. Loudon even published designs for labourers' cottages with adjoining shelters for hives. From the 17th century, observation hives allowed the beekeeper to watch his bees at work; *John Evelyn had one in his garden in 1654.

Modern hives are weatherproof but certain types used until the late 18th century needed protection in wet, windy regions. Some beekeepers in NW Europe built special protective structures, many of which still survive in gardens. The most common is a row of small recesses (bee boles), each for one hive (skep), in a garden wall; there are good examples in the gardens of *Packwood House and *Heligan. Alternatively, several hives might be put in an open-fronted roofed bee shelter, or in a bee house. In the latter, the hives were kept inside, and the bees flew out through holes in the walls. In a large garden the bee house might be an ornamental feature. Many of these three types of protective structure are part of Listed Buildings.

Bees collect nectar and pollen from flowers within their flight range (about 3 km), and in the hive they convert nectar into honey which they store in the combs. The protein-rich pollen is fed to the young bees. A garden with plants suitable for bees therefore contains herbs, shrubs and trees which flower successively and provide nectar and/or pollen. However, not all flower species are attractive to bees, and generally double-flowered cultivars are not useful to them. From the gardener's point of view, foraging bees are welcome because they are good pollinators and their presence can increase yield and quality of fruit and seed plants. In addition, the activities of the bees can be watched and enjoyed. However, the beekeeper has to site hives carefully to reduce the risk of people being stung.

PW and EC

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