



# To bee, or not to bee

*Classified as livestock, bees may be small but they come with big responsibility – and big rewards.*

According to industry advocate and membership organisation Apiculture New Zealand, there were 519,815 registered beehives and 8,190 registered beekeepers in New Zealand as of October 2024.

Bees are crucial to our primary sector and estimated to be worth \$5 billion a year to the New Zealand economy with a role far beyond honey production. They are the horticultural sector's essential workers, pollinating crops and helping with biodiversity.

Hobby beekeeping has always been popular in New Zealand, but with media coverage highlighting the threat from pests and diseases and a lack of forage plants, there has been an uptick in interest for beekeeping generally, and particularly among lifestyle block owners.

Apiarist Sarah Cross has more than 10 years' experience working with New Zealand's leading apiculture and pollination scientists and is passionate about science-driven bee education,

spreading the message of how to be a responsible beekeeper.

Based in Ngāruawāhia, Sarah assists new beekeepers in the Waikato region with hive hire, the sale of bee colonies in the spring, hands-on disease checks and honey harvest. She tutors for NZQA Level 3 Introduction to Beekeeping through Pacific Coast Technical Institute, and is developing an online course to make beekeeping more accessible to those around the country.

"It's nice to see people wanting to be beekeepers for the bees themselves, not just the honey. Keeping happy, healthy, strong bees to increase pollination and insect diversity in our own backyards is super important.

"Those considering keeping bees on a lifestyle block should be prepared for upfront set-up costs for the hive,

the bees, protective gear and some basic tools, plus you pay a yearly registration levy to the American Foulbrood management agency.

"I would always recommend buying new gear as used gear can have pests and diseases which you don't want. My suggestion is to contact your local beekeeping club, go out with them, try a bee suit on and open a beehive with them to see if it's really what you want before you commit to purchasing your own gear and bees.

"Joining your local club will also get you other bee friends who can advise you on the best place to buy your bees and just help with your beekeeping knowledge."

The wide-open spaces on a lifestyle block mean people have more options about where to locate the hive, mitigating the problem that urban beekeepers face.

"Bees poop as they come out of the hive making the neighbours' washing lines a target," says Sarah.

"You do need time and some background knowledge to look after the bees. They're livestock requiring monitoring, medicines and maintenance throughout the year, so if this seems too much to take on, you may want to look at hiring a hive and getting someone more experienced to look after it.

"This way you still get the joy of bees without the stress of looking after them yourself."

In terms of creating a bee-friendly environment on your property, bees love the colour blue and also favour citrus so if you've got fruit trees, you will definitely notice an increase in pollination.

"In saying that, bees will easily fly 2-3km to find food, so don't stress if you don't have too many flowers on your own property, as I'm sure your neighbours will also be keen to have their fruit trees pollinated.

"Bees also need water so if you have troughs or bird baths, you may see them drinking from there. If you want to make them their own water trough, you just need something like marbles or floating corks in the water to stop them drowning."

All beekeepers with hives must register themselves and their hives with the American Foulbrood (AFB) Pest Management Agency at [www.afb.org.nz](http://www.afb.org.nz).

"This is for pest and disease traceability. There are protocols in place to keep your bees, and surrounding bees, safe as AFB is a serious and infectious honeybee disease which if detected, means hives must be destroyed.

"As a registered beekeeper it is your responsibility to check your hive for diseases and/or get someone



Sarah Cross

experienced to do it for you as there is a yearly Certificate of Inspection to complete under the Biosecurity Act. Inspection of every beehive is critical to efforts to eliminate AFB from New Zealand.

"Bees are not as easy to look after as many people think. I know we call it 'hobby' beekeeping, but you can't just plonk a hive in your back yard and forget about it. They require year-round maintenance.

"It just takes a bit of education to keep in front of the bees, and you should make sure that the information you are getting is relevant to New Zealand and your area."

That said, there are many rewards to beekeeping beyond the honey your hives may generate, says Sarah.

"Just knowing that you are helping the environment and increasing pollination is the biggest one. It's such a joy to sit on your back deck with a coffee in hand watching your bees fly in and out of your hive. It's very calming, and we can learn a lot from these industrious bees."

[Visit sarahcsbees.co.nz](http://Visit sarahcsbees.co.nz) for more information.

