

HONEY FROM THE HEART

# Hives for humanity

In a bid to ensure the honeybee's survival, do-it-yourself hobbyists are installing hives in backyards and on rooftops across Australia.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RALPH ALPHONSO  
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Combing the suburbs, these Melbourne rooftop hives each produce about 50kg of honey per year for Mat Lumalasi, dressed here in a protective full-body suit.



IT'S A WARM October day on a Melbourne rooftop. Vanessa Kwiatkowski and Mat Lumalasi are unrecognisable in their full-body suits, their faces obscured from view. They each pull out a gun. There are hundreds, if not thousands, in their firing line. After the deed, they stand there, wisps of smoke still emanating from the guns in their gloved hands, and survey their handiwork. Robbery is now their priority. Across the city, many others are carrying out similar acts on balconies and in community gardens, on rooftops of residences, schools and even hotels.

Welcome to the sunny and subversive world of urban beekeeping – where regular folks don white suits, brandish bee smokers and steal from hives, all in a bid not only to save the humble honey bee, but perhaps to save the world.

BEES HAVE LONG been barometers of the health of this interconnected world we live in. They pollinate more than 70 of the 100 crop species that provide 90 per cent of the world's food. A 2010 Australian federal government report concluded that about 65 per cent of agricultural production in our nation depends on pollination by European honeybees.

Alarming, all is not happy in the hive. Experts cite at least a dozen factors leading to big problems in global bee populations, including increased use of pesticides, air pollution, fungal diseases, habitat loss and parasites. The *Varroa* mite, a parasite that's deadly to bee





**The bee-team**, Vanessa Kwiatkowski, at left, and Mat. "In an urban environment there is so much diversity that the bees really do have a vast selection to choose from," Vanessa says.

"One of the things we can do very simply is grow vegetables, keep some bees and raise a few chooks."



colonies, poses a threat to the species' survival worldwide. In Australia, one of the last *Varroa*-free strongholds on the planet, keeping bees and ensuring healthy species numbers is a critical task. It is a growing trend, with some 10,000 or more registered beekeepers and over half a million hives.

"Bees are the new chickens," Vanessa says. She and partner Mat are the founders of Melbourne City Rooftop Honey, an organisation dedicated to bringing bees back to the city and suburbs of Melbourne. "Not too long ago keeping bees was mainly the domain of old men...but there's been a surge of interest in this dying craft. We have 300 people on a waiting list wanting bees on their rooftops and in their backyards. Business is going very well." Melbourne has joined the likes of Paris, London, Toronto, San Francisco and New York City as a global honey hotspot.

Although some may see the rise of urban farming as a new craze, it is, in fact, a renaissance. Growing food away from where we live and labour is the more recent fad.

Robert Redpath, owner of Bee Sustainable, a Melbourne store selling beekeeping gear and offering courses,



**Urban workers.** "Keeping bees is a wonderful way one can connect to nature, even in our concrete jungles," Vanessa says.

says the movement is very strong.

"People understand and accept that we need to start consuming energy and food differently," he says. "However, it's very hard to address these things... But one of the things we can do very simply is grow vegetables, keep some bees and raise a few chooks."

Although some city-dwelling hobbyists might cite saving the planet as their key motivation for owning hives, others do it for the 50-odd kilograms of

honey that a backyard hive can produce each year, or just because it's fun.

"What we especially like about keeping bees in an urban environment is that you can have your own little sanctuary or 'connectiveness' to nature without having to travel somewhere to experience it," Vanessa says. "Working with bees can also be quite meditative. Some rooftop views are amazing, and some gardens are just like escaping to another world."

"Beekeeping is something you can only do successfully when in a relaxed state of being," says Anna Tonkin from The Urban Beekeeper, Melbourne. "In order to work the bees quietly, with as little intrusion as possible, one needs to be calm and observant. It requires good concentration, thinking and problem solving. It's a matrix of ensuring [adequate] food and water supplies, reproduction and disease management. It really is a craft."

Aside from the technical challenges, dealing with neighbours and their misconceptions can be difficult.

"Many people are unnecessarily afraid of bees," Anna says. "Unlike wasps, bees are not interested in people or food and drink. They go back and forth from hive to flower to hive, literally until they die. If they do sting someone it is most likely to occur because someone has interfered with them while they were foraging. Bees only sting if they feel under threat." The key to keeping neighbours onside is to manage hives effectively and to properly communicate the safety issues. "It's also considered good practice – standard, actually – to share the honey with your neighbours," Anna adds. "After all, their gardens help to make it!"

**U**RBAN HONEY IS a complex blend of all the floral sources the bees have visited. Every sample of honey tastes different on account of this. While an experienced honey judge can detect if the bees have visited kitchen gardens, giving it a herbal edge, rather than having citrus or eucalyptus notes, the average taste tester will simply discover a wonderfully



**Sweet dreams.** Mat holds a frame alive with bees. His partner Vanessa says: "It can be quite meditative working with bees...and some gardens are just like escaping to another [place]."

aromatic honey, on par with (if not better than) commercial products.

"When you eat honey that has been taken directly from the hive, there is immediacy to the experience that's quite exquisite," Robert says. "This is really the way to eat honey. Until you keep your own bees, you're unlikely to experience this."

While it may be overly optimistic to imagine a future in which our cities are living, breathing, more self-sufficient places – with every backyard, balcony, median strip, rooftop and sunny window given over to food, herbs and habitat – implementing such a change might not be as difficult as it seems.

Much of the technology – for example, the beehive itself – is the same as it has been since the good old days. Granted, there have been efforts to modernise the beekeeping craft, but many industry experts deride attempts to improve on the standard hives as pretty but pointless. A futuristic hive concept developed by electronics corporation Philips is a case in point. It looks like an art installation, but some speculate whether it will work as well as traditional hives. If anything, beekeeping in urban areas is looking backwards rather than forwards when it

comes to design. The Top Bar Hive, a model believed to have been developed thousands of years ago, is becoming the city-dwellers' hive of choice due to its ease of use in small spaces. The Top Bar model is set up horizontally so that the bees build a brood nest at the back and fill the front with honey.

The standard Langstroth Hive (pictured above), has removable 'stacked' frames and a vertical top-and-bottom structure. It was patented in the 1800s, and is still the most commonly used to this day – nobody, to date, has successfully reinvented the honey wheel.

In an increasingly interconnected and overburdened world, a move towards self-sufficiency makes a lot of sense – environmentally, financially and

#### Honey, it's the future.

This beautifully designed Philips prototype hive may have a hint of the space-age about it, but can it deliver the goods?



## THE BUZZ ABOUT BEES



- The Varroa mite (left), responsible for damage to bee populations worldwide, is yet to reach Australian shores. Experts say it is only a matter of time until it does.



- Bees travel up to 5km when collecting pollen and nectar.

- In Australia there are 35 industries dependent on honeybee pollination for most of their production.

- Generally speaking, if you are keeping a beehive in Australia, you're required to be registered with your state's Department of Primary Industries (DPI), which conducts disease prevention and control programs for the benefit of beekeepers.

for community wellbeing. As retirees, families and inner-city hipsters all join the movement across Australia, the question needs to be asked if the government is lagging behind in helping make this happen.

Adam Beck, with the Green Building Council of Australia (GBCA), says progress is being made. An 'Access to Fresh Food' credit is being developed by the GBCA in consultation with industry and government and "rewards projects that provide community food production and distribution opportunities – from growing fruit trees and edible hedgerows, to developing community gardens and urban beehives", Adam says.

Although the government is beginning to develop incentives such as these to help inner-city agriculture flourish, it's the everyday people, on rooftops, in backyards and in the suburbs, who are actually driving the agenda.

With growing concerns around climate change and food security, these lone figures – masked, gloved and fully armed – are continuing to take matters into their own hands.

Not to do this, many argue, would be a crime. 