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## Like bees to honey, all sorts of hobbyists attracted to beekeeping

By MARTY ROSS  
Special to The Star

On a bright, mild day when the temperature climbs above 60 degrees and the dandelions push their first bright yellow blooms up into the light, honeybees, the sweetest of pollinators, get busy.

Bees set the pace for the growing season. They are critical pollinators of crops and flowers, and as they go about their jobs collecting nectar and distributing pollen, they're starting the cycle that produces strawberries, blackberries, cucumbers, apples and, of course, honey. You don't have to be a beekeeper to benefit from all the hard work bees do, but starting a colony and maintaining a hive is a rich experience beekeepers treasure.

When the red maples started to bloom one sunny weekend in mid-February, urban beekeeper Robert Burns spent a couple of hours checking on his hives.

"The bees were in a good mood," said Burns, who maintains about 50 hives around the Kansas City area, including in his own backyard in Overland Park. Burns, who is 51 and works at DST Systems, has kept bees for 40 years. He has beehives at Cultivate Kansas City's Gibbs Road Farm in Kansas City, Kan., in a friend's backyard, his mother's farm in Miami County and at other local urban farms.

When he's not tending bee colonies, he raises queen bees and is treasurer in a local bee club. "I'm going to have bees for the rest of my life," he said.

Bee circles in Kansas City revolve around a dedicated core of beekeepers who keep a hive or two, or a few dozen. A growing group of master gardeners, retirees, couples, kids and working people have caught the bee bug.

Brook Thompson, 29, and her husband, Clay Wanstrath, started keeping bees when Thompson learned about environmental stress on bee populations.

"I thought, 'Man, there has to be something I can do to help,'" she said. She applied for a Kansas City beehive permit and set up an apiary in a courtyard near the couple's two-bedroom apartment on 37th Street.

Thompson and Wanstrath learned how to care for bees from books and by attending meetings of the Missouri State Beekeepers Association. For a short time, they moved — with their bees — to Eugene, Ore., and then moved back to Westport.

"Bees are super-resilient," Thompson said.

Their neighbors take a lively interest, coming over to see the bees and telling Thompson, "Your bees were at my house, pollinating my flowers."

Johnson County Community College, MCC-Longview, the Midwestern Beekeeper's Association and the Northeastern Kansas Beekeepers' Association all offer courses that cover basic bee biology, beekeeping skills and equipment.

"There were times when we couldn't fill the classes," said Joli Winer, who has kept bees since the 1970s and teaches classes for several organizations. Now the classes fill up. Winer and her husband, Cecil Sweeney, who met through their mutual interest in bees, own Heartland Honey & Beekeeping Supply. They sell bee and honey gear and keep about 200 hives at a dozen locations, including at their home in Spring Hill in Johnson County.

Getting started in beekeeping requires an investment of a few hundred dollars for classes, a hive, some equipment and bees. Forty years ago, Burns raised his first beekeeping capital as a paperboy. Local bee clubs now offer scholarships for kids 10-18 that cover classes, their first hive, bees, bee gear and membership in the sponsoring club. Students are assigned a bee mentor and attend meetings and prepare a presentation about their experience.

Ezekiel Amador raised money for a beehive for the Switzer/Westside Community Farm through the Westside neighborhood association. "People put in \$25 here and \$50 there, and two people donated \$100," he said. "We started out with about \$600 in donations," which was enough for all the basics and some back-up bees, in case they lost the first colony.

The group had wanted to increase the crop yields at the community farm, Amador said. At first they wanted to try hand pollination.

"Then we thought, 'How about bees, that's what they are supposed to do.'"

Amador, who is 44 and was a stay-at-home dad when he got started three years ago, took bee classes at Johnson County Community College. There have been some missteps (a gardener knocked the hive over last year by mistake), but this year will be the group's third year with its own beehive, and it's ready to add two more, putting bees to work pollinating an orchard.

To help provide for the garden's bees, the group sent an email to the neighborhood association, encouraging residents to plant bee-friendly flowers.

"They're the flowers everybody loves, and so do the bees," Amador said.

Bee stings are part of the learning experience. Winer teaches beginning beekeepers to dress for the job.

"Wear as much protective clothing as you feel comfortable in," she said.

Some beekeepers feel fine without gear. Steve DeCaigney, who lives in Independence and keeps bees at his brother's home in Kansas City, always wears a bee suit and veil.

"It's not a real good fashion statement, but it serves its purpose," said DeCaigney, 58, who has kept bees for two years, took bee classes and goes to monthly Midwestern Beekeeper's Association meetings.

"When I first got involved, the honey interested me," DeCaigney said. "After I got involved, it was the bees. They're fascinating. Once you have one hive, you want another one."

City bees really have a good life, these beekeepers said.

"There is an amazing amount of food for bees in towns," Winer said.

City bees are not exposed to agricultural chemicals, and gardeners who don't use pesticides and who plant clover or allow clover to bloom naturally in their lawns provide a great environment for bees.

Where bees thrive, people do, too.

"Bees are important," said Katherine Kelly, director of Cultivate Kansas City. Keeping bees "makes you relax and slow down in different kinds of ways," she said. "It's really satisfying. You pay attention to bees, and it adds depth to your experience of the world."

#### Bee laws

Check local codes before you invest in a hive. Kansas City requires a permit to keep bees but does not regulate where hives should be placed or restrict the number of hives. Beehives may be declared a nuisance if they are not maintained or if neighbors object. Overland Park allows residents to keep as many as three beehives.

#### The initial investment

First-time beekeepers will need to invest in classes, a hive, gear and bees.

"For someone to start one hive, you're probably talking about \$400-\$500," said Cecil Sweeney of Heartland Honey, [HeartlandHoney.com](http://HeartlandHoney.com). Do not start beekeeping with a secondhand hive, he said, because diseases can linger in old equipment. Once you have the basic equipment of bee veils, gloves and tools, then adding hives is relatively inexpensive.

Missouri Extension's Beekeeping tips for beginners, [Extension.Missouri.edu](http://Extension.Missouri.edu), encourages novice beekeepers with basic woodworking skills to make their own beehives. Plans are available on the Internet at [beesource.com/build-it-yourself](http://beesource.com/build-it-yourself).

#### Potential pitfalls

Mites, moths and diseases can devastate a hive: A beekeeper's best defense is a good education, says Joli Winer, who has been keeping bees for 40 years and teaches classes. "You have to know what to watch for," she says.

Experienced beekeepers can help. "Once you know what to watch for and how to control problems, you can be successful," she says. A healthy hive tends to be able to take care of itself. "The bees sometimes survive in spite of us," Winer says.

#### Resources

- Missouri State Beekeepers Association, [MOStateBeekeepers.org](http://MOStateBeekeepers.org)
- Kansas Honey Producers Association, [KansasHoneyProducers.org](http://KansasHoneyProducers.org)
- Missouri Extension's Beekeeping tips for beginners, [Extension.Missouri.edu/p/g7600](http://Extension.Missouri.edu/p/g7600)
- Bee Culture magazine, [BeeCulture.com](http://BeeCulture.com), published monthly, often includes articles on urban beekeeping.

#### Classes

- Midwestern Beekeeper's Association, [MidwesternBeekeepers.org](http://MidwesternBeekeepers.org), meets monthly. A beginner's beekeeping class starts March 16.
- Northeastern Kansas Beekeepers' Association, [NEKBA.org](http://NEKBA.org), meets monthly. Its beginner's beekeeping classes are March 10 and 17.
- Johnson County Community College, [JCCC.edu](http://JCCC.edu). Beekeeping classes start March 20.
- Metropolitan Community College-Longview, [MCCKC.edu](http://MCCKC.edu). Classes began in February.

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