

# SA EXTRA URDAY



Doug Purdie tends to the native and honey bee apiary at Randwick Environment Park.  
Picture: Dylan Robinson

**CENTRAL SYDNEY IS SEEING A RENAISSANCE OF HIVES AND HONEY MAKING AS BEEKEEPING IS BOOMING, WRITES NEIL KEENE**

# IT'S A BUZZY CITY

**S**YDNEY'S hive mind is helping the humble honey bee thrive in the suburbs once again.

Even in the densely populated city centre, thanks to a project installing beehives atop some of the CBD's busiest high-rise buildings.

Urban Beehive co-founder Doug Purdie says that after largely skipping a generation, interest in beekeeping was enjoying a sweet resurgence.

His organisation tends more than 100 city hives stretching from Bondi to the Inner West.

More than 30 have been established on rooftops of commercial buildings in the CBD, including the Shangri La Hotel near The Rocks and the Macquarie Group HQ on Elizabeth St. Hundreds more are maintained by amateur beekeepers, whose colonies take flight from courtyards and balconies across the city.

But not everyone is impressed. Celebrity chef Colin Fassnidge posted photos to social media earlier this month after someone deliberately poisoned a hive he maintained for years atop his Four In Hand restaurant in Paddington.

The weekend Fassnidge was due to move out of the restaurant, after selling it as a going concern, he climbed to the roof to discover thousands of bees, dead inside the hive.

"It's pretty narrow-minded and pretty sad," he says.

"In this day and age, bees

are even more important than ever. We started this one up about four years ago as a little project and we used the honey in the restaurant."

Fassnidge says he received direct complaints prior to moving on from Four In Hand, as well as others via the local council, from residents scared the bees might sting their household pets.

"I think some of the well-heeled Paddington residents think they can more or less do what they want, say

what they want and make things happen."

Mr Purdie, a former president of the Amateur Beekeepers Association of NSW, says only a concerted, deliberate effort could wipe out an entire colony so quickly.

One of Mr Purdie's beehives was also poisoned deliberately, in Bondi about two years ago.

"Generally, you can tell it has been deliberate, because the whole hive is dead," he says.

"If the bees go and forage in some poison, it won't kill the whole hive, but in the case of

Colin's hive, the whole hive died within a day, which is most unusual."

The number of people registering to become recreational beekeepers is at a record high, with more than 3000 apiarists now on the Department of Primary Industries' books.

Membership in the Sydney Bee Club — the central Sydney branch of the Amateur Beekeepers Association of NSW — has grown from fewer than 10 people two years

ago to more than 120 today.

Other regional clubs have reported a doubling of interest over the past 12 months.

Demand for new hives is so great that there is now a shortage in some areas of so-called "nucleus colonies", comprising a queen and several thousand workers, to stock them.

"It's growing exponentially every year," Sydney club secretary Elke Haage says.

"We've had three new clubs start (in 2015) in different regions in NSW. I think there is this resurgent popularity of people being more self-sustaining generally."

Mr Purdie says the hobby is attracting urban dwellers of all backgrounds.

"We're getting younger people who have just bought a house, the older generation who have more free time and want a backyard hobby and we are seeing parents who want to be able to do something with their kids at home."

Adding to demand is burgeoning interest in the Flow Hive, a NSW invention designed to allow beekeepers to extract honey from a hive with only minimal disturbance to the bees within. The concept has copped criticism from many parts of the beekeeping community due partly to its plastic working parts and the fact apiarists using the Flow Hive may be less likely to inspect the colony for disease.

But a worldwide crowdfunding campaign to launch the product raised \$16 million in just weeks. Mr Purdie, who has written a book on

backyard beekeeping, says bees have long suffered the stigma of being dangerous and aggressive, when in fact they are a productive and peaceful creature that generally stings only as a last resort or in defence of its hive.

And their work ethic is incredible. It is estimated that a hive undertakes more than 80,000 individual foraging flights, collectively travelling up to 250,000km, to produce a 500g jar of honey. Some fly up to 5km in search of nectar.

Bees whose owners set up shop in Sydney's concrete jungle have a surprisingly bountiful range of plants and trees close to home, including in the Botanical Gardens and bee-friendly paperbarks in Surry Hills. Mr Purdie says a single bee queen holds such sway over her colony that if she has an aggressive temperament, so too will all her offspring. But a specially bred "gentle" queen transforms an entire hive's demeanour in just a few weeks. "They are such fascinating insects," he says.

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**There is this resurgent popularity of people being more self-sustaining**

Elke Haage

