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Phone. +64 3230 4525

E-Mail. renertech@xtra.co.nz

VoIP [renertech1@skype.com](https://www.skype.com/renertech1)

Web. www.coffee.20m.com

183 Drysdale Road.

R.D.2.

Invercargill. 9872

New Zealand.

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Keeping Bees with Coffee.

As always, my major concern has been with the small holder coffee industry. There are lots of professional Apiarists who can quickly adapt the modern state of the art to the plantation sector, but nobody I know of has done it for all the 'Juan Valdez's' of our industry. Nevertheless, having kept bees myself, in both tropical and temperate climates, though not claiming in any way to be a professional, here goes.

Individual coffee flowers do not have a lot of nectar, but they do have the advantage, in dry climates, of multiple flowerings during the year. About ten days after a good shower of rain your coffee trees will gladden ones heart with a burst of white blossom that foretastes a harvest about 5 months down the track, and an immediate burst in activity from your bees. In a wetter climate, there is usually only one major flowering per year, but there are also lots of other foliage and flowers around to keep a hive ticking along. Heard of one guy who always chopped his old banana stems in short lengths to let the bees feed on the juices. Anyone else heard that?

Housing:

Let me start with some history. We have all seen those round straw woven skeps in old European paintings. They were well insulated and kept bees nice and warm in winter. At harvest time one just up ended the skep, clawed out the combs with honey and tried to leave as much of the newer brood comb, and the queen of course, intact. The skep was replaced on its stand for the seething mass of bees to re enter, repair the damage and start over. The mix of combs and honey extracted was dumped into a basin

or bucket over a small fire. The molten wax was skimmed off the top and the honey strained through a cloth and poured into jars with melted wax over the top to seal them. Absolutely nothing was wasted. The cloths, hands and all other gear were washed out in a bucket of water which was then set to ferment, naturally of course, and bottled as honey mead. All set to warm ones heart on a cold winter night. The only experience needed was a few years of standing and watching dad get stung up, and getting enough stings oneself to be also pretty much immune to bee stings by the time you had to do it yourself. The person in the village who was most immune was the 'bee man' of status, who got called in to help with everyone elses harvest. Do also note that beekeepers never suffer from arthritis.¹

In the tropics one does not need straw skeps, it is more important to keep the hives out of the sun rather than to keep them warm. But every other part of the historical process can let the coffee small holder of today enjoy a couple of hives along with his coffee to keep his family supplied with sweetness. Much more efficient are the modern top bar hives, which can be made out of old packing cases, or even the box itself from heavy cardboard.²
^{3 4} Bees wax is also a tradable item with a bit of extra cash flow.

Some problems:

An increasing problem in many parts of the world is the presence of wasps and hornets etc. who wait around hives, catch heavily laden bees and fly off with them and chomp them up to feed their larvae. If one can follow a wasp as it flys off, it is not too hard to find the nest. A shot of insecticide, petrol and a match at night, or advice from the local expert will remove that problem. Varroa mites⁵ are also pretty much world wide, but much more insidious. There are no simple inexpensive cures for them. We await the breeding of resistant strains of bees.

A greater problem for coffee growers in the Central and South American States has been the influx of Africanised bees.^{6 7} Beekeepers in Africa have lived and dealt with them since ever, but their interbreeding with the docile European strains has been a rude shock for the rest of us. Their stings are no worse than that of their European ancestors, but they are that much more touchy and liable to attack on mass! Working them at night doesn't make them any less irritable, but there are less other people around to get stung.

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¹ <http://www.beesource.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-228183.html>

² <http://beesabroad.org.uk/>

³ <http://www.bushfarms.com/beestopbarhives.htm>

⁴ <http://outdoorplace.org/beekeeping/kenya.htm>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varroa_destructor

⁶ <http://www.desertusa.com/insects/kbees.html>

⁷ <http://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.cfm?number=B1290>