

Sweet lessons: Taiwan urban beekeeping gets positive buzz

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Urban beekeeper Sherry Liu took a beekeeping class seven years ago and is now an avid apiarist.

Under mulberry trees at a bee farm in Taipei's suburbs, students watched intently as instructor Tsai Ming-hsien wafted smoke over a hive box,

explaining to aspiring apiarists how to keep the insects happy in an urban setting.

His audience included entrepreneurs, retirees and even a six-year-old who reached eagerly for a frame pulled from the box, as Tsai demonstrated how bees can be kept calm with a smoker.

"Many join my class out of curiosity," said the 43-year-old instructor who also heads the Bee and Wasp Conservation Association of Taiwan.

"They want to learn more about this insect, which has important economic values and a crucial role in agriculture."

Bee populations around the world are facing disaster from overuse of pesticides, predatory mites and [extreme temperatures](#) due to climate change.

That also spells catastrophe for humans, as three-quarters of the world's main crops depend on bees to act as key pollinators.

Temperature and weather fluctuations in Taiwan have impacted honey output in recent years. From 2020 to 2021, it jumped nearly 60 percent to 13,260 tonnes, before dropping to 9,332 tonnes the following year.

Tsai said recreational beekeeping in Taiwan has grown steadily over the past decade, with people tending about a dozen to up to 60 hive boxes in their yards or rooftop gardens.



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"The city is overdeveloped with less green space and declining biodiversity," he told AFP.

"We hope this creature will act as a key to open more knowledge about nature and ecosystems."

Money for honey?

Six-year-old Hsia Wei-yun, who attended a class in March, was thrilled to watch bees flitting on a box frame.

"I think it's a lot of fun keeping bees. I got to hold a bee frame," she said excitedly.

Her mother, Hsia Cho-hui—who also brought along her son—said she had been concerned about whether there was enough nectar in the city, and fretted after one class that beekeeping seems "very complicated".

But the class has fueled her children's interest in getting their own hive box, and "it'd be a little difficult to dissuade them", she said.

Some, like Edwin Huang, see Tsai's class as a chance to make money while taking part in the "under-forest economy"—a practice of developing and selling eco-friendly products that give back to the environment.



Recreational beekeeping in Taiwan has grown steadily over the past decade.

"I think keeping bees can help improve the overall ecosystem... it is a very positive activity for both personal and public reasons," he told AFP.

The 40-year-old currently produces colored dyes from aster, a [flowering plant](#), that he grows on a hillside in New Taipei City, and plans to one day open a diner where he could serve the honey he produces.

"I'm learning the techniques while researching my menu," he said.

'A pleasure'

Retiree Sherry Liu, who took a class seven years ago and is now an avid apiarist, said she is "not in this to make money".

She started with three hive boxes for bees that had flown into her rooftop garden and has expanded to 12.

"It's very healing to watch bees fly. They look very cute when they fly... It's a pleasure for me," she told AFP, dressed in protective headgear and jacket as a swarm of bees flew around her.



Three-quarters of the world's main crops depend on bees to act as key pollinators.

Liu usually harvests honey three to four times a year, sharing the fruits of her labor with relatives, friends and neighbors.

But she lamented that this year's rainy and cold conditions have hit her production.

"I couldn't collect any winter honey because the weather was really bad and the bees ate all the honey (in their hives)," she said, adding that it can be "quite troublesome to tend" to her boxes.

"You need to be loving—you can't just keep them but not look after

them."

Tsai said that he does not expect everyone who attends his class to become a bee farmer or keeper.

"But we hope at least (people) can get to know and understand them, and won't rush to destroy them when they appear," he said.

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