



LEFT: Sarah Wyndham Lewis of Bermondsey Street Bees
BELOW: Sarah's husband, Dale Gibson



bee happy

Sarah Wyndham Lewis is at the forefront of the URBAN BEEKEEPING movement. She talks to Grace Cain about her NEW BOOK, *Planting for Honeybees*, and ways to encourage our winged friends

How does someone with a severe allergy to beestings get involved with beekeeping, you may ask. It began just over 11 years ago. Sarah Wyndham Lewis was enjoying life as an interiors writer when her husband, Dale Gibson, announced that he was about to embark on a beekeeping course at the local community garden. Despite her understandable reservations, curiosity trumped anxiety and one sunny morning, Sarah ventured out with Dale to begin a journey into the wonderful world of beekeeping.

'With just his bare hands, this guy opened a hive and ran his fingers through the bees on the frame,' she explains. 'You start to engage with the idea that they're actually very gentle creatures, if they're just allowed to get on with what they do.'

The couple were soon hooked. Starting out with just a few hives on the roof of their London home – a converted Victorian warehouse in the shadow of the Shard – Sarah and Dale have developed a micro-brand, Bermondsey Street Bees, to educate people on the vital importance of bees. As well

as hives based around the country, the company now boasts an apiary at Soho Farmhouse, an award-winning honey, various collaborations with a number of top chefs, and now a book.

Planting for Honeybees isn't a typical gardening book. In fact, it's not so much a gardening book as a guide to attracting bees to your patch with the right planting, whether you have the tiniest window box or a sprawling wildflower meadow. Charmingly illustrated and accessible to both horticultural novices and experts alike, the book is in many ways a reflection of Sarah's own unpretentious and infectiously enthusiastic attitude towards gardening.

'I am by no means any sort of guru,' she says, emphatically. 'I just wanted to learn and understand more about bees and plants, and this book is a



BE MORE BEE FRIENDLY - SARAH'S TIPS

1 If you are considering keeping your own hive, do your training and do it properly – that means living an entire bee year alongside an experienced beekeeper, so you understand what has to be done each month.

2 Because they only have very short tongues, honeybees are much fussier feeders than other pollinators. Pollen-packed, open-head flowers are much easier for them to access; and they're great for other foraging insects, too.

3 Bees don't want to hurt you – they just want you not to bother them. If you're careful and respectful of them, you generally won't get stung.



charting of that process. I want people to feel they can scribble their own little notes on its pages.

'People can be so precious about gardening. Everyone wants their garden to look like it's going to appear in a magazine, and then they feel like a failure when it isn't completely perfect. My garden is a total mess, but I'm not trying to win any beauty stakes – I'm just gardening for my own pleasure, and trying to put in as much forage as possible for the bees.'

So, if there's one bee-friendly plant that anyone could keep alive, which would it be? 'Herbs.' Sarah says. 'The first things I ever planted with the bees in mind were sage, oregano, rosemary and thyme. But you mustn't pinch the tops off your herbs before they flower, because that's of no use to the bees. I plant twice as much as is necessary, and then I can pinch the ones I need for the kitchen and leave the other half for the bees.'

And, contrary to what you might expect, a tree or a bush will provide a higher density of pollen than a flowerbed, which, of course, is what attracts the bees.

'If you plant and nurture just one bee-friendly bush, you will have done something fundamentally brilliant,' says Sarah. 'That one bush will not only provide forage for the bees; it will provide an entire habitat for masses of other creatures.'

When asked why she thinks beekeeping has become fashionable

Planting shrubs and flowers with a high pollen density will help to create the ideal habitat for honeybees

in urban areas, Sarah sighs. 'It's a worry, isn't it? It's like when a dog wins Crufts and everybody suddenly wants that breed. The problem is that the city's resources are not infinite.' Therein lies the issue. While the idea of more people setting up beehives in their gardens may seem like a good thing, it's only beneficial if there's enough forage to meet the increased demand, particularly in built-up inner city spaces.

'If you set up a hive without being sure that there's enough food for the bees to eat in your area, or without being totally sure of what they're going to need, it's like buying a herd of cattle and turning them out onto a tennis court,' Sarah explains.

'As the world gets busier and more pressured, I think a connection to nature becomes ever more appealing. Beekeeping looks like this golden, enchanting thing; people assume it's going to be nice and easy, and then bounce back off it when it suddenly turns out to be hard work. If you don't love it, you shouldn't do it, because you can't just walk away from a hive. Beekeeping is an all or nothing situation.'



Planting for Honeybees: The Grower's Guide to Creating a Buzz by Sarah Wyndham Lewis is out now, published by Quadrille, (£12). Illustrated by James Lewis Weston

