

The French government wants to create a million new hives and 30,000 new beekeeping jobs

It's a sweet life!

France is a haven for beekeepers - **Daniela Harris** discovers the buzz about town so you'll have all the essential information bee-fore you buy a property!

There are over 70,000 beekeepers in France, with 1.30 million hives producing 18,500 metric tons of honey each year. In 2010, the French beekeeping sector's estimated worth was €133.5m. However, despite what sound like enormous amounts of production, the French appetite for honey is so strong that to quench the Gallic thirst for amber nectar, the government is still looking to create a million new hives and 30,000 new beekeeping jobs in order to curtail the importation of honey from foreign soils.

If you're a keen gardener - and even if you aren't but love honey and want to support your ecology, buying a home which lends itself to beekeeping can be enormously rewarding. As a beekeeper you will be joining an ancient tradition in France, where emblems of our fuzzy friends can be found as early as 1653 in the tomb of King Childeric I, father of Clovis.

Napoléon Bonaparte, nicknamed 'The Bee', dismissed the lion and the cockerel in favour of the bee as the emblem of his royal court. For him, the bee symbolised

an orderly society and tireless industrious diligence - all useful attributes for building a great empire as well as a home!

If you are a novice beekeeper or new to France, don't worry, there are over 200 beekeeping schools in France. So, it seems that beekeeping is not only viable but very rewarding and, with a little preparation you can build your own sweet life in France!

BRITISH EXPAT KEVIN BAUCHEN RUNS COURSES ON HOW BEST TO PLAN YOUR MOVE TO FRANCE WITH BEES IN MIND.

How did you end up in France?

My wife and I were working in the south of England in the charity sector and were looking for a different kind of life, with a truer sense of community, closer to nature and more greenery. With five times the landmass and a smaller population we felt France could offer that more than the UK.

Did you decide on beekeeping before coming here?

Yes, we were already beekeeping hobbyists and felt we could turn it into something

more, a lifestyle. We picked this part of France because, as well as the climate and space, it was affordable. The house we are currently living in would cost north of £1m where we came from and we would never have been able to afford it.

How do you run your business?

On the one hand we run a straightforward B&B side, which has mostly French clientele, and on the other we run beekeeping experiences, for which the clientele are more international anglophones. They typically come for a day course to find out if it is for them and if they decide it is, book again for the week-long course. On the day course, people either take to it or not at all, it's very black and white.

Most beekeeping in France is small scale, why is that?

Like all things in France, there is an awful lot of bureaucracy surrounding running a proper beekeeping farm. We worked out that in order to reach a healthy level of profitability and pay the social charges the French government demand to run an enterprise, you'd need a

minimum of 110 colonies, that is an awful lot of bees.

What are the main challenges today keeping bees?

There are numerous things happening that have created a challenging environment for bees. Climate change is undeniably impacting them in a negative way. Modern-day pesticides create a really big problem for bees and the most recent thing to have devastated bee colonies is the invasive Asian hornet that has been destroying our native species.

So what are the rewards?

Surplus honey and beeswax left over from managing our hives are lovely byproducts but not the real reason we have hives. We keep our bees to educate others on their positive environmental impact and give back to the ecosystem by ensuring healthy, natural pollination happens in our area. The joy on new learners' faces when they conduct their first hive inspections, or chatting with taster session visitors who have just held a handful of honeybees. It's very rewarding for us to see others



€1.1M

LIMOGNE-EN-QUERCY, LO

Beautifully renovated farmhouse in a quiet hamlet but close to a village with amenities. There's a three-bedroom main house, two guest suites, pigeonnier, summer kitchen, pool, workshop and a large barn, all sitting in a plot of over 90ha of land.



€149,000

VAL-D'OIRE-ET-GARTEMPE, HAUTE-VIENNE

Gorgeous former school house in a peaceful hamlet yet just 4km from facilities. The property boasts three bedrooms, a covered terrace, a workshop and 1,600m² of land. The 57m² former school room, with bar and door to the garden, is ideal for entertaining.



€399,000

GINALS, TARN-ET-GARONNE

Beautifully restored country house with three bedrooms, a large studio for guests, a covered terrace and its own stream-fed lake. Located in an idyllic spot in a hidden valley.



€288,900

BERGERAC, DORDOGNE

Lovely two-bedroom house in a small hamlet northeast of the bustling city of Bergerac. Comes with a cosy sitting room with a log-burner, a swimming pool and two storage sheds.

enjoy the bees and develop the passion for themselves.

What are your favourite honey products?

Acacia honey - light, subtle and not too sweet and stays liquid for a long time. I also love making things like food wraps, lip balms and candles with the beeswax we recover from the colonies.

When buying a house in France, what is important for keeping bees?

You need space to work around the hive and you need to be confident that they won't be close enough to other people in order to minimise the risk of

anyone being stung. Putting a hive in the middle of a *potager* is great for pollination but not so much fun if you need to be weeding or watering in front of the hive all the time!

Consider their placement on your land and how far away the hive will be from where you keep your kit and tools. The hives need to be stable and level, irrespective of which type (there are dozens and dozens) so a steep, rocky garden is not going to work.

They should be protected from the worst of the extreme elements; frost pockets and damp are enemies as the colonies struggle to stay healthy and keep warm during

the winter. It's also believed that hive entrances should ideally be oriented towards the east (or southeast) so that the sunshine comes through the entrance to wake them up and encourage them to get foraging.

Did you choose your home with bees in mind?

Absolutely! We have four acres of parkland garden planted with a wide range of melliferous plants and trees. It's designed to give the bees as much forage as near to home and for as many months in the year as possible (there's something for them year round). A standard beehive colony is said to need about an acre of forage to

thrive... that doesn't all have to be on your land, of course, but it does mean if you have a smaller space, you need to think about where they will go for food and water. Our land is on a hill and there's water towards the river for them, even in drought conditions.

Do you think beekeeping in France is easier than in the UK?

Yes and no. The UK has a much more organised support and advice system for beekeepers via local associations and clubs, often overseen by the British Beekeeping Association. This countrywide network doesn't exist in France, where beekeepers tend to be

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€583,000

LUXÉ, CHARENTE

Gorgeous 19th-century manor house set on just under three hectares of land, just a short drive from the shops and restaurants of Mansle. The property boasts seven bedrooms, a large terrace, a small garden tower and a large stone outbuilding.



€450,000

VERNOUX-EN-GÂTINE, DEUX-SÈVRES

Charming fully renovated three-bedroom country house boasting a beautiful bespoke kitchen, reclaimed milled oak floors, stunning master bedroom suite, landscaped garden, heated pool and garage. Amenities such as supermarkets are only a 10-minute drive away.



€845,000

ALBI, TARN

Beautiful stone house set on a large plot of 13,000m². Comes with two bedrooms, a three-bedroom annexe and a library with a fireplace and magnificent views. Outside there's a terrace, a large swimming pond, pool house and a carport.



€295,000

LUSSAC-LES-ÉGLISES, HAUTE-VIENNE

Fantastic family home and guest house in a pretty hamlet location. The property comprises a two-bedroom main house, a two-bedroom guest house, garden, terrace, barn and above-ground pool. Close to the village of Lussac-les-Églises.

more commercial. Hobbyist beekeeping isn't as popular here so the support typically caters more for professionals. On the flip side, buying bees has been cheaper here every year since we moved, as have the hives themselves, although internet suppliers from the UK are still better for equipment like tools and suits. ■

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FRANCE FACTFILE

- 91% of beekeepers have fewer than 30 hives, producing small amounts
- 5% have between 31-50, but also have another job
- 4% are professionals who manage over 150 hives and produce over 60% of French honey production
- Organic honey represents 5% of production
- The agricultural education system includes professional beekeeping training

CHECKLIST FOR BEES ON YOUR PROPERTY

- Before buying a hive, you should check at your *mairie* for any restrictions (there can be extra rules if you live close to a school or a retirement home, for example)
- If you are not allowed to keep bees in your garden, you can arrange to keep them elsewhere
- Check your land is not on a slope and the spot is sheltered
- Once a colony has moved in, you are not allowed to move it out
- You could also try to get an allotment where you could install a hive
- Think about the planting in the area and what plants you might want to introduce