

*"I prefer to be alive, so I'm cautious about taking risks."*

— Werner Herzog

I was once asked to come to a new beekeeper's house to evaluate his colonies. When I arrived, I said, "Where are your hives?"

He pointed to a stand of very tall, very thick grass and said, "In there."

Folks, our bees need to be able to enter and exit their hives. Just as important, we need close-up access to them in order to do inspections. That requires the vicinity of hives to be free of chest-high grass. As a bonus, keeping the area around hives neatly trimmed greatly decreases the risk of being attacked by ticks (see "[What Makes Ticks Tick?](#)").

While the need should be indisputable, the solution is not. Lawn mowers are to honey bees what cats are to dogs. They seem to incite aggression for no logical reason. In the height of the spring nectar flow, when Life is Good, such bad behavior may not appear if we keep sweet-tempered bees (as we should). But mid-August, even the most peace-loving colony may very likely come out in force to defend against The Machine. I myself have been chased out of the bee yard on at least one occasion, leaving the running mower behind to fend for itself.

This is the definition of our dilemma. To find the best resolution, I asked members of my local beekeepers' association how they deal with the issue.

### General advice

- Mow at night, if the mower has lights (courtesy of **Tom Kirby**).
- Use a Roomba-type robot mower as is used on large corporate and university campuses. No human exposure is involved (courtesy of **John Vargas**).
- "I always wear my bee suit when mowing and weed-eating within 25 feet of hives" (courtesy of **Fred Fesel**).
- When the stinging starts, it is time to wrap up.
- A lot more cutting can be done behind and beside hives than in front.



The author's 1951 John Deere Model M tractor is great for cutting wide swaths of grass but it's not the best for close-up work. One careless tap could topple stands and hives alike, setting off Bee-maggedon!

- Different mowers have a different pitch and elicit different responses. Furthermore, electric mowers are quite different from gas mowers in the way they sound and the fumes they emit. **José Olmedo** uses an old-fashioned reel mower, eliminating engine noise entirely. **NCD&CS Chief Apiary Inspector Don Hopkins** uses a very old-school scythe (as carried by the Grim Reaper) and hand-held sickle.
- Mulching mowers are better than regular ones because they don't shoot out clippings or air.
- Underlayment helps a lot! Gravel, mulch, concrete, old carpet, pavers (**Ginia Roll** suggests using the interlocking plastic ones) etc. are all good options.

### Stories from the bee yard

**Nancy Oglesby** offered the following advice: "Before I installed my hives, I put down some of that black plastic weed barrier fabric over a wide area. The fabric covers at least 6 feet in front of the hives. On top of that we put fresh wood chips that we got from one of those Asplund trucks. That kept the weeds mostly away for several years. Last year on a cold winter day we raked away some of the old rotted wood chips and put down fresh ones.

"When I do my hive inspections (in my bee suit) I pull any weeds that I see. I am always

surprised that the bees haven't ever stung one of us when we are mowing. We are careful to make sure we drive past the hives with the clippings blowing out away from them."

**Susan Montpetit** said: "I used cardboard as the weed barrier and took 4- to 6-inch-thick pine trees (about 10 to 15 feet tall) to border/outline the area, then added pine mulch and planted a few poppies and other pollinator-friendly plants along the border.

"So far, the bees don't care that I go zipping around sans bee suit on the riding mower since the border of the bee yard is about 10 feet out from the hives."

**Celeste Mayer** offered: "I mow and string-trim moving toward and backwards to cover a big arc around the hive so I am always facing the hive keeping an eye on how they are reacting. Never back and forth from side to side in front of the hive. I also have a limited number of hives (three) and they are separated by 10 feet or more."

**Jennifer Keller**, who has more experience with this sort of thing than most people, said: "I don't have a solution, but I will tell you how I handled the yard at NCSU in the past. We have a very nice John Deere riding mower that I have used for many years. The hives are lined up in rows. I learned to go down each row as close as I can with the grass shooting away from the entrance of the hive. I make one pass with the mower in high gear going as fast as I can, then go mow another section of the yard for a few minutes until the cloud of bees calms down, then I make another pass, and go back to another area. Usually by the third swipe, I am far enough away from the hives that the bees no longer seem to care. I don't usually have any problems, but on rare occasions I have had to put on a veil. It is almost like a challenge every time to see if I can do it without getting stung!"

**Janet Staats** offered: "I plant white clover around the hives, so I don't have to mow too much because it usually stays shorter. Of course, it's not always growing and grass can take over or can get really lush and tall during the wet season. The general idea being to plant

a lawn alternative that requires less maintenance.

"When mowing, I avoid crossing their flight path except for the one time needed to mow that specific area and I mow that area very efficiently. For weed-eating near hives, I suit up."

**Jim Barrick** gave these observations:

- "First and foremost, mow in the evening or early a.m. The bees are calmer at those times of day. The evening seems to be better -- no science to back that up. But their day is winding down versus up."
- The side discharge must be away from the hive and never comes close enough to get the bees' attention. If you are far enough away, it does not seem to matter where the discharge is pointed. Each bee yard is probably different but I find that at 10+ feet it does not stir the bees up. Better yet use a mulch mower thus no side discharge.
- I have only two hives thus far in the 'mow zone'. To be honest the space is not large and I use a push mower. I think the riding mower stirs them up too much. But I mow the area farthest away first and this seems to help the bees acclimate somewhat. I find that I can get all but the last two passes without an issue. I walk fast on the last two. The closest pass seems to be the only real problem. And this is generally not a problem if it is evening.
- If it is late July/August all bets are off and I put on the bee suit for those. I really only need it for the last couple of passes. It's hot and looks funny but beats getting stung and the yard looks good!
- I had mulch on top of weed screen under the hives and I had hive beetles. The hives are in the sun but still shaded underneath. I removed the mulch (leaving the weed screen) and replaced with a couple inches of well fillings (same thing as 'rock dust' you can get from a quarry). This helped with the beetles. It packs over time and does not erode -- and no weeds! And you can take it up if you decide to move your operation. If

you run this out far enough (say one to two mower widths) then you should be able to push-mow in comfort most of the time.”

**Scott Crabtree** had the following advice:

1. “Best weed barriers: This is nothing new, but I've always found that roofing shingles are my go-to surface under all of my hives. I've even moved them when I've had to relocate an apiary. They will last forever as long as you get them down flat and don't hit them with the mover.
2. My only guidance on mowing around a hive is NEVER EVER use an internal combustion push mower around a beehive. They are air cooled and the same spindle that is attached to the blade has a mechanism attached at the top that pulls air through the engine and out the top. Run that baby under a double-deep with all the bees bearded out front in the middle of July. Fun times! Ask me how I know! Seriously, I use a riding mower, in the middle of the day, and trim with a weed-eater, and have no problems. I do have my hives positioned so that I can always avoid the discharge from the cuttings hitting the hive. I also do NOT keep nasty bees and do think it's best to do it during the same conditions as you would when entering a hive (mid-day, clear skies, no wind, etc.).”

**David Eckert** tells us: “Through my years as a beekeeper I've developed a few different habits and strategies for mowing while producing less of a defensive reaction from my colonies.

1. I locate my apiaries in areas where no one cares if the grass gets a little tall. That reduces the number of times that I have to mow in a summer. Sometimes it's only four or five times total. It also means that I get to choose if or when I mow. If weather conditions and the temperament of the bees that day aren't conducive to a pleasant mow then I just wait until another day.

2. I build a taller stand. I build my stands with 18- to 24-inch legs to get the hive entrance up higher. That means I can let the grass get tall without significantly impeding traffic at the hive entrance. Again, allowing me to pick my time to mow.
3. I think of grass cutting around a hive as a minor colony disruption similar to a hive inspection, and treat it as such. In fact, I regularly combine the two and will mow or string-trim in an apiary just after inspecting the colonies. That way the bees are already a little disoriented or distracted from my inspection. I also already have a smoker lit and will give them an additional puff just before I cut the grass in front of their entrances, and I already have my protective gear on or nearby. I developed this habit in part because I keep a couple of out-yards and combining the apiary grass maintenance with my inspection trips was convenient, but I've adopted this practice in my home apiary now too.
4. Like Nancy and Jennifer, I try to blow the grass clippings away from the hive and make quick passes across the front of the colonies. The worst stinging incident of my long mowing career was from inadvertently blowing grass clippings into a hive entrance in late July. Lesson learned and fastidiously observed.
5. I try to cut as much as reasonably possible from behind the colony before moving out front. In many cases I have those taller stand legs which allow me to cut all the way underneath the colony and even a little in front from behind the colony. Which makes my time running a mower or trimmer in front of the colony and those pesky guard bees a little shorter. Seems to help.

“Even with doing this, I still get stung on occasion. It's not very often and way less than I get stung during hive inspections. It's usually no stings, very rarely one or two stings, and seems to have reduced over time. I'm going to choose to interpret that as my efforts and practices making a difference.

"I have not tried to use any weed or grass barriers in my apiaries so far. As you can likely tell, I just try to manage the vegetation around my colonies to my own ends and minimize the time and effort that I put into it."

Equally insightful is **John Rintoul's** advice: "Buy hearing and vibration impaired bees! 🧐"

"I have used both a gas-powered string trimmer and a handheld electric trimmer immediately in front of my hives (both strong and weak) without incident. No PPE required although I wear eye protection when using the string trimmer. I generally do hive yard clean-up before 10:00 a.m. Temperature, nectar flow, time of year don't seem to be factors. I don't do yard maintenance on the same days that I inspect, Varroa-treat or harvest honey. No more than one hive-stressful encounter per day.

"Other options for managing weed/grass growth in front of hives: I'd suggest laying down a layer of cardboard (a great re-use of Amazon delivery packaging). The cardboard is then topped with a 2- to 3-inch layer of pine bark or wood chip mulch. (Wood chip mulch will sprout slime molds or other mushroom type fungi. Not a real problem, but can be ugly.) The pine bark version will protect against weed/grass growth 3+ years. This is a time-honored weed control technique touted by the NC Extension Master Gardener program. Works great! No chemicals required."

### The last word

A **good friend and excellent beekeeper** had this to say: "Don't know if any of this is wise to broadcast in print... maybe redact names to protect the identity of those involved:

"I rent. The landlord pays a fellow to come by every couple of weeks to mow. One day after getting some hives back home from the mountains, well aware of how spicy they were, and watching the fellow get closer and closer with the mower, I kept hesitating on issuing a warning with the naive thinking that everything would be fine. Watching from the kitchen, he cruised by unmolested and I went about my business. About two minutes later he staggers up to the door covered in stingers. Had every

opportunity to warn him. Most irresponsible thing I've ever done while beekeeping. Lucky it wasn't any worse. He got several pounds of honey, whatever produce I had on hand from the garden, and a brand-new bee jacket. He wears it when he mows now. He's also become fairly adept at detecting when his mowing has them particularly agitated. Watching him cruise by on the zero-point mower while wearing a bee jacket is always a treat.

"Anecdote aside, I don't have any whiz-bang tips other than just wearing the suit and suffering the heat. Fully protected, it doesn't matter how irritated the bees get, and I can weed-eat to my heart's delight and meet my exacting specifications for a well-manicured lawn around the hives. Suffering in a suit (which I do anyway when working the bees) while doing some yard work beats the price paid via some tick-borne disease or getting chased away thinking that maybe this time, they'll be just A-Okay with my string trimmer. Just stay away for a while after you've riled up a colony!"

### All beekeeping is local

There you have it: the collected advice of a wide variety of Piedmont beekeepers. You'll notice that some say, "What a problem!!!" while some say, "What problem?" Some say, "Mow in the morning" while others swear by, "Mow midday." That, my friends, is what makes beekeeping a craft rather than a science, and what makes it so enjoyable!

As with all things related to beekeeping, I encourage you to ask questions, weigh responses, experiment and then do whatever you think is best in your situation. Why should you do otherwise?

*Randall Austin is a NC Master Beekeeper who keeps a few honey bee hives in northern Orange County, NC. He can be reached at [s.randall.austin@gmail.com](mailto:s.randall.austin@gmail.com).*

*Note: All previous articles are archived at [https://baileybeesupply.com/educational\\_resources/](https://baileybeesupply.com/educational_resources/) © S.R. Austin, 2025, no reproduction in whole or in part without permission of the author, except for noncommercial, educational purposes.*