

First steps in Beekeeping - Beginners guide

Beekeeping impinges on many aspects of our lives. It brings together those interested in improved agricultural production and the well-being of the countryside, gardening and education, food and cooking, and ancient craft skills as well as scientific work.

Beekeeping is a diverse activity centred on the honeybee *Apis mellifera*. Some people, both men and women, become absorbed in the systematic and often hard physical work of securing good honey crops. Others find satisfaction in some special aspect of the natural history of the honeybee. There are devotees of each of the different aspects of beekeeping technology, honey and beeswax processing, exhibiting and marketing. Beekeeping Associations bring people together from all walks of life who are concerned to further and to share their own knowledge and love of the honeybee. There are beekeepers, and not all with our type of honeybee, in nearly every country in the world.



The Honeybee Colony

In summer there may be as many as 50,000 honeybees in a strong colony. One of them is a queen, capable of laying over 2000 eggs per day. There are also several hundred drones, male bees whose major function is to mate with the young queens, and the remainder are female worker bees. The workers' role changes during their adult life. At first they tend and feed larvae, then clean or construct the wax comb cells. After serving as guards at the hive entrance, they forage for nectar, pollen and propolis from plants and also for water. Honeybees turn the plant nectar into honey, store and use pollen to feed their larvae and employ a mixture of natural resins (propolis) to strengthen and waterproof the hive. The honeybee colony behaves as a single unit and, although the modern hive permits the beekeeper to perform many manipulations, the colony is not 'domesticated' in the way that farm animals are. The successful beekeeper will therefore learn to work with his bees, to handle them with gentle firmness but without fear. He also learns to observe, interpret and assess quickly and to be alert to the needs of the colony.

Obtaining Bees

The source from which the beginner gets his or her bees is important. Many honeybee colonies are of uneven temper, they may carry one or more adult or even brood diseases, and have poor honey-getting abilities.

Professional bee breeders and the beekeeping appliance trade select bees for yield, docility and freedom from disease. This may not be true of the local beekeeper who is selling off surplus stock. Local bees will, however, be adapted to the climatic pattern of the area and are to be preferred, if from a good source. No beekeeper should object to a request to

provide an undertaking that the bees offered for sale are free from disease or refuse an inspection by a Bee Diseases Officer.

a) A complete colony may be purchased. This consists of ten or eleven combs and is a complete 'going concern' with a fertile queen, workers, drones (at the appropriate time of year), stores of food, and brood. Such a colony should produce a surplus of honey in the first year, if it is obtained in May or early June.

b) A nucleus is a small colony of four to six combs, with a fertile queen, workers, possibly some drones, and some brood and stores. Because it is small, the number of bees involved is limited and it will be easy to handle. The nucleus will grow into a full colony during the course of the year and it may even produce a little honey. As the nucleus grows, so does the confidence and ability of the beginner beekeeper.

c) The value of a natural swarm (a free living colony without combs) depends on its size and whether it is headed by a queen of a previous season or an unmated queen of the current year. Early swarms will develop well, but late swarms and casts (second or third swarms produced in the current year) will need heavy feeding if they are to survive the winter. Unless of known origin, any swarm should be regarded with suspicion until it has been proved disease-free and of even temper.

d) A package is an artificial swarm 'packed' in a wood and wire gauze container by a beekeeper offering bees for sale. It will need careful management and feeding.

Choosing a Hive

In the past, bees were kept in straw or wicker hives called skeps, from which at the end of the season, the honeycomb was removed after the bees had been killed or driven from the hive. Some colonies were retained as stock hives for the following year. Nowadays, this wasteful way of keeping bees is not practiced in this country. The modern beekeeper uses moveable frame hives, of which there are several kinds. All can be manipulated so that the beekeeper can observe what the bees are doing and exercise a measure of control over them. In Britain, there are six types of hive available, of which the single-walled Modified National and the double walled 'WBC' are the most popular. The four others, all single-walled hives, are the Commercial, Dadant, Langstroth and Smith. Many other types will be found overseas.

Unless the source is known, all second hand hives and other equipment must be sterilized before use, as it is easy to transmit honeybee disease on old combs and equipment.

The construction of hives is well within the capacity of the woodworker who can work to accurate measurements. The British Beekeepers' Association publishes plans for the National, Smith, Langstroth and 'WBC' hives. As well as one or more hives, the beekeeper will require personal bee-proof clothing - veil, boilersuit, pliable gloves - together with a smoker and its fuel, and a hive tool. As the first season develops, additional items will be found useful and these are likely to include a feeder, cover cloths for use during manipulations, and a notebook, small hammer, pliers and string in an easily portable tool box. If the first season is successful, honey extraction equipment can sometimes be hired through the local Association.

How Much Honey?

As much as 150 lb of honey can be obtained from one hive in a season, but this is

exceptional. Much will depend on the season and the district as well as the skill of the beekeeper and the manipulations undertaken. In an average year, 20-40 lbs can be regarded as a reasonable amount.



Beekeeping Associations

The British Beekeepers' Association (BBKA) has, since its foundation in 1874, existed to further the interests of all branches of beekeeping in the UK. There are now, however, national associations in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, with the BBKA representing beekeeping interests in England and the Isle of Man. The BBKA is made up of some 61 County and District Associations and eight specialist bodies, all of whom appoint delegates to the BBKA annual delegate meeting.

In addition to its links with the specialist national associations, the BBKA has a number of committees drawn from knowledgeable beekeepers from all parts of the country who deal with such diverse matters as honeybee diseases, research on bees and allied subjects, shows and exhibitions of honey and other hive products, legislation affecting the keeping of bees, insurance of beekeeping activities, standardisation of equipment, and education and examinations in proficiency in apiculture. The BBKA also provides specialist and general information about bees and honey. As well as the BBKA's monthly journal *Bee Craft*, a news-sheet, *BBKA News*, is published several times a year for circulation to members. Membership of a County Association or one of its branches offers affiliate membership of the BBKA and:

- An opportunity to get acquainted with bees before commencing beekeeping
- Advice on the purchase, location and installation of a colony, and equipment, sometimes at discounted prices
- An opportunity to participate in local, regional and national events of interest
- Summer field meetings, winter programmes including lectures, film and slide shows, discussions and social events
- Evening classes, weekend conferences and educational and special interest tours

Most affiliated County Associations participate in the BBKA Combined Insurance Scheme against vandalism of hives and equipment and their loss by theft, fire and flood. Third Party cover is also available. The special Bee Disease Insurance Scheme, provided by BDI

Ltd, offers a range of cover against financial loss due to American and European brood diseases.

Further Reading

Many Associations have lending libraries of beekeeping books. Public libraries will obtain books on beekeeping on request and may well stock one or more of the beekeeping magazines that circulate in this country. Most bee appliance dealers stock books on beekeeping, including the Devon Apicultural Research Group guide and advisory leaflet on the problems of garden beekeeping, called 'The Beeway Code'. The Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) publishes a number of advisory leaflets covering bees and pollination.

Guide to Bees and Honey

Ted Hooper purchase from www.amazon.co.uk

BBKA Advice for Beginners

Find and join the local branch of your Area Beekeeping Association, or your local library may have an address.

During the Winter:

Go to lectures and meetings of your local branch. Attend any courses you can find. Read, using the library of your Association and your local library. We suggest two of the books to read are 'Guide to Bees & Honey' by Ted Hooper and 'Beekeeping - A Seasonal Guide' by Ron Brown.

Take a beekeeping journal.

Find a site for keeping your bees, your garden may not be suitable.

In the Spring:

Buy, from a beekeeper in your association if you can, a 4-frame nucleus with a young queen. Ask for bees that are quiet and easy to handle.

With your nucleus you will gain:

- Experience
- Confidence
- Manual skills

You will be unlikely to have swarming problems.

Your bees will be on 10 to 11 frames by July.

Feed them for the Autumn.

Next Winter:

Make or buy two more hives.

In the following Spring:

Increase your bees to two stocks by making an Artificial Swarm.

Collect a swarm.

By the end of the season you will have three good stocks, experience and a crop of honey.

This advice is based on that given by Ron Brown the author of many books on this subject.

Internet Resources: Graham Law has produced an excellent beginners FAQ, well worth a visit. <http://www.beeinners.info>