

Information sheet from Phil Craft, retired Kentucky State Apiarist

For more beekeeping information from Phil see: <http://www.philcrafthivecraft.com>

Getting started as a beekeeper - Phil's tips!

First question. When is the best time of the year to get started in beekeeping? The answer is spring, which means April and May in most of the United States. This early time of the year gives your new colonies time to gain in population (because it is better for the novice beekeeper to begin with hives with small populations of bees - read on) and time for the new beekeeper to gain beekeeping knowledge. Also this spring start takes advantage of honey bees' natural cycle of rapid growth in the spring.

And what is the first action to take in preparation for the trip down the beekeeping road? Or to help decide "is this something which I really want to try or which is practical for me to do"? Answer: buy a good beekeeping book and read it! Read it all - from cover to cover. See my list of *Good Beginning Beekeeping Books* at my webpage. Also seek out a local beekeeping association. This is easy to do - just put the name of your state in an internet search engine like Google or Yahoo and type in "state beekeeping association." I'm certain you'll locate the webpage of your state association and most such organizations will list the local beekeeping associations in their state. (I do have a listing of many state associations on my webpage.) Also attend a meeting. Your local beekeeping association meetings will give you an opportunity to meet and talk to beekeepers. Many also offer beginning beekeeping classes and have mentoring programs for the new beekeeper. You may be able to make contact with a beekeeper who lives near you and be able to visit his or her bee yard and look inside a hive together. (Buy or borrow a bee veil and gloves first). Your university extension service or your state department of agriculture's apiary division can also help you connect with local beekeepers and provide you with basic information.

Around the country, many one day regional or state-wide beekeeping schools are held in the winter or early spring at a minimal cost. There are six of these schools in Kentucky. If possible, make plans to attend one of these schools. Even if you're not certain that beekeeping is for you, attending a school will aid you in making that decision, and you will have learned a lot about this fascinating insect the honey bee. You will not have wasted your time. Most of these one-day schools are held on Saturdays, before the beekeeping season begins, and include classes designed for the novice which will offer sufficient instruction to get you off to a good start. Even if you have to drive a some distance to attend one of the schools, you'll find it worthwhile.

I also suggest looking at catalogs from one or more beekeeping equipment supply companies, some of which also sell bees. See the listing of *Beekeeping Equipment Suppliers* at my webpage. Most of these companies have web sites with online catalogs, or you can request a catalog to be mailed to you. Looking through the catalogs, you will see what the equipment looks like and be able to compare costs. However, I suggest that you educate yourself before purchasing equipment. If you do not, you may end up ordering items that you don't need, or do not need when first getting started. On the other hand, do not wait too long to place orders for equipment. If you're planning on getting started in April, you may need to place your order in February to assure delivery on time. Suppliers become very busy in the spring and often receive orders faster than they can ship them.

I also suggest, if you can afford it, that you start off with new equipment, especially for the actual hive components. Disease can be spread through old equipment, and even more important, it can be difficult for the inexperienced beekeeper to determine the true value of used equipment. I often warn new beekeepers that when you buy cheap used equipment, you may get what you pay for.

A note on terminology before I talk about purchasing bees: a “hive” is the equipment - normally mostly wood, where the bees live. “Colony” basically means the bees and their queen - the actual bees. An established colony may consist of 50,000 bees or more.

How should a new beekeeper acquire his or her first colony of honey bees? I recommend the purchase of “package bees” from a bee supplier or of “nucs” of bees from a beekeeper. A package is a small quantity of bees (actually sold by the weight of the bees – two pounds, three pounds or four pounds), along with a young queen. (A colony must have a queen bee). These come in a wooden shipping package which can be delivered via the mail or picked up directly from the supplier. The beekeeper then installs the bees, along with the queen, in an empty hive to start the new colony. The installation process is very simple and can easily be done by someone with zero beekeeping experience by merely following the directions shipped with the package. (I will also have information on package bee installation at my webpage.) An alternative to package bees is purchasing a nuc, short for nucleus hive. A nuc is a new colony, that an experienced beekeeper has already begun by transferring bees from an existing hive, along with a new queen, into a special small hive called a nuc box. A nuc is very similar, in terms of the number of bees, to a package. The beekeeper then transfers the nuc into an empty hive. Many beekeepers, and some beekeeping supply companies, sell nucs of bees in the spring. Nucs from local beekeepers typically become available a little later than package bees, unless you live in the southern parts of the country. In Kentucky, you can usually find them in late April or May. Your local beekeeping association is the BEST place to begin looking for local nucs or package bee sources.

Why do I recommend starting with a package or a nuc rather than buying an existing hive? With nucs and packages you begin with a smaller number of bees (10,000 or so.) The advantage is that it is easier for a new beekeeper to manage the smaller colony and as your beekeeping experience grows, the size of the colony grows with you. It’s sort of like getting a puppy rather than a grown, 40 pound dog, but without the house breaking.

Is it possible to purchase an existing hive of bees from a beekeeper? It is, but I strongly discourage this method of getting started. The existing hive, as I stated earlier, may contain as many as 40,000 to 60,000 bees, and is quite a challenge for a brand new beekeeper. It can be downright intimidating. It may also force the new beekeeper to deal immediately with more advanced management issues such as swarming and disease problems. Moreover, an existing hive consists of used equipment the value and condition of which a new beekeeper does not have the experience to judge. So I suggest leaving the purchase of existing hives to seasoned beekeepers. When a beekeeper of several years wishes to increase his or her operation, buying existing hives can be a good way to grow quickly, but for the beginner, purchasing packages or nucs of bees is more likely to lead to a successful experience.

For answers to additional questions – such as “How much does it cost to get started?”, “What equipment will I need?”, “Do I have to live in the country to keep bees?”, or “How much honey will a hive of bees produce?” – see my article, *What Do I Need To Get Started As a Beekeeper?*, available at my webpage. It is designed to help those interested in beekeeping to decide whether or not it is something they would like to pursue.