

Setting Up from Scratch

By Celia Davis, Master Beekeeper, NDB

When we have kept bees for several years it is easy to forget how daunting starting out in beekeeping can be. Celia Davis reminds us all what decisions need to be made when setting up from scratch – so spare a thought for the novice and offer help and advice where you can.



Before launching into beekeeping everyone should be encouraged to attend a local class. All photos by Celia Davis.

Beginnings are always exciting and beekeeping is especially so. I well remember, forty years ago, taking possession of my first colony; the sounds of the bees, the wonderful smell of new wood and beeswax. Exciting yes, but also quite scary. In those days, beekeeping was nowhere near as complicated and difficult as it is today, and today's novices have to take on board much more disease control and colony management than we did in the 1980s. So where to begin?

Essential grounding

The first important step for anyone wanting to keep bees is to contact their local association and start going to meetings. Meet people, listen to what is going on and ask questions. Much of the chat will be confusing at first, but that will improve. The next step is to attend a training course and it is most important that our beekeeper comes into contact with bees and handles frames so that (s)he at least begins to appreciate the skill required and, more importantly, understand what it means to be surrounded by a large number of insects, all of which can theoretically sting. Some people find that they simply cannot handle this. So they are better to find out right at the beginning, save themselves a lot of money and heartache, and go away and plant flowers to benefit pollinators. They can then watch the bees in the fields or in their garden, and enjoy them in that way. Once these preliminaries have been addressed it is time to make plans, buy things and generally launch into this new experience.

Equipment

The items that our novices will buy may be dictated to some extent by the depth of their pockets. Beekeeping, however, is no more expensive than many other hobbies; think about photography, golf or fishing, and it should give some small income in due course, although chickens (or honey crops) must not be counted at this stage. In any case, if the aim is to make a fortune, go and do something else.

Certain items are essential; a hive tool, smoker and veil are fundamental. The hive tool is a matter of preference and it is useful to try one or two different types at an association apiary before a decision is made. When purchasing a smoker, it is advisable not to choose a very small one as they go out quickly and soon become redundant if the enterprise grows. A veil of some sort is absolutely essential, but other protective clothing is a matter of choice. A full bee suit is what most people purchase, but it is a costly article. A top with veil attached is a cheaper option, but always ensure that there is not a gap around the waist somewhere as bees love gaps in clothing. Whatever type of clothing is chosen my advice would always be to go for good quality as cheap alternatives often do not seem to function as well and do not last. Thin disposable gloves are now the norm, either vinyl or Marigold type. Always ensure that they cover the wrists well or you can buy gauntlets to cover your wrist.

Hives

Now the exciting bit. There is always much discussion surrounding choice of hives. It may be fixed; I had a student once who had been told by his wife that he could only have bees in the garden if they lived in 'pretty' hives, by which she meant white WBCs, so his mind was made up. These apart, most hives are square boxes, and WBCs are simply plain boxes with extra bits round the outside, but with different dimensions and here the advice and experience of other beekeepers is invaluable. I would advise any beginner to keep well away from innovative hives and stay with those that are tried and tested. It is a fact of beekeeping life that most beekeepers in England keep their bees in National hives, but even here there is a choice of standard-sized brood chambers and deeper ones. One of the main factors to consider is weight. Brood boxes are quite heavy when full and larger hives, such as Langstroth and Commercial, while giving a bigger area for brood, can be very heavy. If our novice is a big strong chap



Confidence in handling and controlling bees is essential as you work on your own bees.

this may present no problem, but if she is like me, a small female and perhaps past the first flush of youth, it can be a major drawback. Then there is availability of frames and foundation.

National brood box and super frame sizes

Truth to say, all sizes are usually available everywhere, but National is universal. The hive will need frames to fill it and wax foundation to put in the frames. Frames can also be confusing. If our novice decides on National equipment then DN stands for Deep National and SN for Shallow National, but the numbers following those prefixes relate to the width of the top bars and the style of the side bars. Basically 4 and 5 signify Hoffman self-spacing side bars and 1 and 2 are narrow side bars which will need ends on them or castellated spacers built into the boxes. 1 and 4 have narrow top



A nucleus colony is a colony in miniature; gentle, small and easy to manage, and the ideal way to start.

bars and 2 and 5 have wider top bars which give greater strength and lead to less brace comb. Prices vary according to the type. There are also Manley frames. I would not recommend those for a beginner, but other people may disagree. In general, many beekeepers use DN4 or DN5 in the brood box but SN1 or SN2 in the supers, so that the spacing there can be varied.

Assembling hives and frames

So, a hive has been purchased. If it is not preconstructed, which obviously costs more, it will need to be built and filled with frames. Generally, hives and frames are built from flat packs and, to avoid problems in the future, the novice should be shown how to assemble them at their association meetings. There are also some good demonstrations in videos on YouTube. The carpentry skills



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Apiary meetings and practical demonstrations of beekeeping skills make up an important element of novice beekeeper training.

required are minimal, and it is quite fun and satisfying to build your own hive from the bits. One last rider; it is always best to begin with two complete hives plus a nucleus box. That gives flexibility, and extra equipment is essential for controlling swarms and getting a second colony going. I believe that the aim should always be to have a minimum of two colonies as just one is a recipe for disaster; think eggs and baskets.

Siting the hives

The hives are bought and built, and the question arises of where to put them. This question is probably better asked right at the beginning, because it is a very important one. Many people setting out as beekeepers just assume that they will be able to put them in their garden, but this may not always be possible or desirable. There are three stakeholders to consider:

The bees

They will need a continual supply of food throughout the spring, summer and early autumn. As well as the numbers of suitable flowering plants in an area, adequate forage can be affected by the number of beehives in the vicinity; there will be only a certain number of flowers to share out at a given time. Before deciding on a hive location, it is always best to have a potter around the neighbourhood looking for hives. Talk to people in your association, while bearing in mind that quite a lot of beekeepers do not belong to any organisation and like to keep their heads below the parapet. I have one such person near me who maintains that all beekeeping groups are full of nosy, meddling, old women and he wants nothing to do with them. The bees will also need a source of water and you should try to find them a sheltered sunny position. If there is too much wind, think about erecting wind breaks and perhaps plant hedges for the longer term. Always avoid frost hollows and very damp situations.

The beekeeper

The comfort and convenience of the beekeeper is definitely something to consider. Make some strong hive stands so that the hives are at a more convenient working height, such as those

shown in the photo above. Bear in mind that the hives will not remain as single brood boxes, but will need supers on them and this will further increase the height. This may make it more difficult for those of us 'vertically challenged'. Will the hives be easily accessible for a car, trailer, wheelbarrow or other type of transport? Carrying full supers any distance, possibly over fences and ditches, can be quite dangerous, as well as being annoying!

Other people

This possibly should be the first group to consider. Wherever the bees are situated, face the entrances away from human activity. Although the hives take up little space, bees whiz about and know no boundaries. Many neighbours do not take kindly to bees next door and are, understandably, anxious, particularly about the safety of small children. Provide a source of water and ensure that fences/hedges/tall plants or structures will push the bees' flight line up above people's heads. Education, reassurance and jars of honey can only go so far, and be aware that once there are bees in your garden, any stings caused by whatever insect will probably be attributed, rightly or wrongly, to your bees. This can lead to friction and I have seen some quite unpleasant situations and disputes arise. If the garden is small and surrounded by people, it may be best to consider an out-apiary a short distance away. There are many places available, even in towns, and associations are often approached by people who would like some beehives on their land.

Stocking a hive with bees

Once the course has been done and all the essential hardware has been obtained and sited, it is time to think of bees. There are three ways of acquiring bees:

- a nucleus of bees,
- a swarm,
- a complete second-hand colony.

Each of these has its advantages and drawbacks.

The nucleus of bees is simply a small colony on five or six frames and should be a colony in miniature, complete with a marked,

fairly young queen. It is less daunting for the novice, than a full colony and, providing it is cared for properly, it will develop rapidly into a full colony. It is best obtained locally, as local bees always perform better than those moved from elsewhere. Here, the local association may be able to help. The nucleus has all the advantages and only one disadvantage; it costs money.

A swarm is free. Again, the association will help as collecting a large swarm should not be attempted by the complete novice. Disadvantages are, if the origin is not known, that it can be diseased, the bees may be very defensive and it is unlikely that there will be a marked queen.

The third option is a tempting one for many novices. Second-hand colonies often come in second-hand hives, which will considerably reduce the cost of setting up,

but beware. Reasons for the sale may be genuine, but the colony may carry a heavy disease and mite burden and the temper may be doubtful. Often, people wishing to reduce will offer colonies for sale in the late summer once the crop has been removed, but the novice should be warned never to purchase bees at this time of year. Always wait for May/early June. Such a colony will have overwintered successfully, whereas one purchased in the late summer probably will not have had the varroa treatment or have been fed for the winter. Many such colonies are dead before the following season, leading to disappointment and disillusionment.

When purchasing second-hand equipment, take an experienced beekeeper with you to inspect the colony and equipment. Remember that even equipment that has had no bees in it for many years can carry the spores of one of the most destructive

diseases known, so must be treated with extreme caution.

The advantage of starting with a large colony or a swarm, apart from cost, is that it may produce a crop of honey in the first year, but a nucleus can also produce a small crop and, when starting, a small crop is probably all that is needed. My first colony, which came as a nucleus on 4 June, produced 13kg (28lb) of honey in its first year. This will always be the best honey ever tasted. The major disadvantage to large colonies is that they may seem intimidating.

Final thoughts

Do not assume that, after doing a course and visiting an apiary a few times that will suffice. Beekeeping is a craft and a science which takes many years to grasp. Most novices think they know it all after their first year then, with every subsequent year, they realise how much there is to learn until by about year five they realise that they will never know everything.

It is probably pointless to say so, but it is best not to be in too much of a hurry to start. Attend apiary meetings, begin to understand bees, although you will never understand them completely, and glean as much useful information as you can.

Finally, always remember that bees are animals and should be treated as such. It is easy to forget about those wooden boxes when they do not need feeding every day or taking for walks, but they are all full of the most wonderful creatures and, once you own them, they are your responsibility to care for to the best of your ability. They may change your life and take you to strange places, but the more you become immersed in beekeeping and the more you learn, the more enjoyment you will get from it.

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