

The Traveling Beekeeper



IS NOW A GOOD TIME TO START KEEPING HONEY BEES?

by LARRY CONNOR

Wicwas Press

1620 Miller Road, Kalamazoo, MI 49001

LJConnor@aol.com

As I travel to various parts of the country and talk with beekeepers, I discover a common similarity—there are many new beekeepers in every audience, even folks who do not yet have bees, but are taking the class or meeting to learn more before they start. In the past there were usually a few new beekeepers in an audience—one or two—but lately the number of new beekeepers—I affectionately call them *newbie's*—make up 20 to 40 percent of the crowd. And yes, the attendances are much larger in many areas. There are at least two factors increasing these numbers. First, there has been enormous publicity about the importance of honey bees in light of Colony Collapse Disorder, or CCD, and this is often the rea-

son given by people as to the timing of their bee interest. But when I talk to these folks, I find out that they were already interested in keeping bees, and have reached a point in their life where the kids were out of the house, retirement was approaching or already here, and these *newbie's* had both the time and the financial means to keep a few colonies of bees on their property. The CCD publicity served only to set the time of their attempts at beekeeping.

The second driving force is the huge shift in American attitudes toward eating food that is produced locally. The rapid move to the acquisition and consumption of locally produced food (Locivore, Eat Local, Local Sustainability), has motivated many folks to put in gardens and orchards.

Gardens and orchards need bees for pollination, and bee hives produce honey, beeswax, pollen, and propolis and can be both good and fun for you, too.

People should start keeping bees when their interest is high, and they are motivated to learn and start colonies. To keep their interests high, they will need significant support to keep them at beekeeping, since it is easy to become frustrated when something does not go well. There are also a number of couples and life partners keeping bees, as well as parent-child teams at the classes. This is a good plan if the kid grows up and goes to college and gets a job; they are skilled beekeepers when it comes time to take off the honey and bottle it for gifts or sale.



Colonies along a hedge. Such placement protects the colony from strong prevailing winds, and creates a microclimate that is generally warmer in winter than open areas. Facing the east or south, the colonies warm quickly during the day.



Just a few miles from the Mediterranean Sea, this colony is placed just off the rough, rocky road into a brushy site. The openness is a function of the landscape, but the small pines provide wind protection. The rocky land provides for rapid drainage from rains.



Hives on concrete blocks in a research apiary in Avignon France. Bee colonies do not need, or even want to be, in uniform, even rows, since this reduces forager orientation and increases drifting from colony to colony.



Heavy duty metal hive stands provide the bees a place off the ground, away from ants and other predators, and away from the hot sun reflecting off the soil. A hedge row also provides wind protection.

What information do you need to start beekeeping?

Terminology. Beekeeping contains a huge stew of terms and expressions: Do the expressions *making splits*, *taking increase*, *dividing hives* and *artificially swarming a hive* all refer to the same basic act by a beekeeper, or is each a specific event? The vocabulary of beekeeping changes as you visit different parts of the country, and there are a large number of beekeepers who refer to a hive as a "swarm" five years after it was hived. It stopped being a swarm when it was put into the hive, but it is hard to change language and speech patterns. There is certainly an educational challenge in learning how to speak beekeeper in your area!

There are a number of approaches to solving this problem. As an author and publisher, I am pleased when beekeepers study a book like Dr. Dewey Caron's *Honey Bee Biology and Beekeeping*, which is perhaps the most comprehensive book for new beekeepers, with biology in the front part and beekeeping in the back. There is an eight page Glossary. And it is well illustrated, a fact I supported while working with Dewey to design the book. Sure, there are many smaller, less complete books on the market, but if a beekeeper stays with beekeeping, he or she will ultimately want a book like Caron's.

Mentor. A valued and trusted beekeeper is essential to most new beekeepers, and is probably the one key factor that determines success or failure during the first two years of beekeeping. Many beekeeping organizations have members who will who can check in to see how you are doing. But I enthusiastically support the progressive bee clubs that have mentoring program as part of their overall annual program, with monthly sessions before their group meeting. These clubs that encourage young members and provide them with

mentors get top marks.

Classes or Bee Schools. There is probably a bee school in your state this winter or spring. You will need to find out where it is. Many are one-day events hosted by regional and state organizations. I help teach at some of them. They provide an extremely efficient way of getting the maximum amount of information to beekeepers in the shortest period of time. You run the risk of fatigue (the brain can only take in what the backsides can tolerate). Many bee schools are reasonably priced, and may include membership in a bee organization.

More structured bee schools are offered by clubs for newbie's, often running four to eight weeks, once a week. This allows more time for personal study, and allows facts, vocabulary and the methods of beekeeping to sink in. But if you have to drive some distance, it can tie up a lot of time, often in the winter when weather can be a real issue.

Combination classes, of several weeks, ending in day-long field experience in April or May seem to meld these two methods together, and provide a great deal of information for the new beekeeper. The limitation on any of these courses are the credentials of the instructor or teachers. Look for classes organized by college professors, master beekeepers, state apiary inspectors and certain bee supply dealers. Ask about the level of experience the instructor has working with bees.

References. Take the time to do some research, on-line or in a good beekeeping book. Search for a local class on beekeeping, asking around at the County Extension Office, farm supply store, nature center, and farmers market for a lead on where and when a class may be offered. There is an ocean of information available on the Internet, and some of it is excellent. Again, look for the connections with academic,

scientific and professional ties. Look for beekeepers who have kept bees for many years—the bees may have awarded them an advanced degree!

What equipment and supplies will you need to purchase?

New beekeepers open bee supply catalogs with a mixed reaction of excitement and horror. How much of this stuff do I really need? If you take a class you will probably learn how to sort out some of the essential stuff from the frills. For me, there are two key questions most beekeepers must ask as they start:

1. How many frames will I have in my boxes? For most of the country, the answer is to use a *ten-frame hive body* (the box the bees live in). Frames, or combs, are where the bees put their developing immature bees, also called brood, which includes the eggs, larvae and pupae. The bees also store pollen (from flowers) and honey (also from flowers and converted from nectar to honey by both the field and hive bees).

Certain bee supply companies support eight-frame hives. These are common in the middle of the country. Supporters argue that the bees are just as productive in eight frames as they are in ten frames, and the smaller box requires few food reserves. I lack data on this, but I suspect both systems work. Eight-frame hive bodies weigh less and may be useful for that reason alone.

The above talks about hive bodies, or brood boxes. When the nectar flow is about the start, you will add honey supers (=superior) to the brood boxes into which the bees will place surplus honey.

2. What depth hive body will you use? There are two common frame depths in the United States, and a third more common in certain areas and in Europe. The standard

is the *Langstroth depth hive body and frame*, and I suspect that this size is nearly universal in commercial beekeeping operations. When filled with honey, each box may weigh 70 to 100 pounds, and will require considerable effort to lift. Many beekeepers have bad backs, and this hive depth is the reason. Many beekeepers keep bees in deep hive brood boxes, but use the Illinois (Dadant) box as a honey super. They keep brood frames as brood frames, and honey frames as honey frames, since the two will not mix due to size.

The Illinois (Dadant) depth hive body is often used as a honey super, but may be used as a brood body to reduce the weight of the hive. I used three Illinois depth hive bodies per hive in my hobby beekeeping in Connecticut for several years and had mixed results. The boxes are easier to lift, but I tried to keep bees in three hive bodies instead of two Langstroth hive bodies. So, you have added a third more equipment. I was unable to tell if the bees were as productive on these shallower frames as on deep frames.

I would like to find bees that will survive the winter in two Illinois depth boxes, as this is successfully done in some areas. My goal was to have one size box and frame for both the brood chamber, and for the honey super. That way drawn honey combs could be added to the brood chamber without an issue.

The Dadant original depth hive body (not available in the U.S.) is very deep, and usually only one box or hive body is used for the brood chamber. They necessitate permanent hive locations or good moving equipment. In Europe some beekeepers like the deeper Dadant frame for use in a nucleus hive, in boxes either five or six frames wide.

Where will I get what I need?

Buy all new equipment. This includes the hive bodies (boxes) and the frames (combs). You can buy them unassembled and have the pleasure of assembly, or you can buy them pre-assembled, including the frames with foundation, from several manufacturers, many advertising in this magazine. Look at the addresses and find the closest supplier to you. I am physically



This cluster of hives is unique in one way. Each hive is facing a different direction, and drifting from colony to colony is all but eliminated. Note the lower vegetation and natural setting. Areas of moderate "brushy-ness" are not bad places for bees since weed and grass growth is low and the entrances are not blocked by dense vegetation.

closest to the Dadant branch in Michigan, a 45 minute drive. This means that I can drive over and pick up a load of equipment for use without dealing with shipping and paying freight costs. But there are several very good mail order options, and I have used them, too. Equipment availability is sometimes difficult in the spring, so get your order in now for the 2009 season, or you may be disappointed.

Where would you establish your apiary?

Most beekeepers start colonies in the suburbs or the country, and keep their bees on their own property. This reduces the bother of renting a site, and providing security (from vandals, bears and other predators) for the hives. If you have bears in your area, you will need to investigate bear fencing, a real bother. If you have a few acres of land, you can certainly find a site where the bees will be convenient to manage for you as the beekeeper, but also out of sight from the road (to reduce vandalism), and away from family, pet and farm animals.

I like to find an area on a raised piece of land where there is good air drainage, but surrounded by trees and brush or in the wind shadow of an outbuilding to protect the bees from the prevailing wind. An area of low growth is good for this, where you can cut or mow the vegetation and grass and keep it low around the hives. You want

to be able to get to the bees and find them. Tall grasses interfere with bee flight. I also like to position the bees so the colony entrances face south or east, and the sun shines on them during the morning and noon of the day. If they are in afternoon shade in the summer, this will help keep the hive cool. In hot sunny areas of the country, where the vegetation is limited for shade, you might use wood lathe to provide shade during the heat of the day.

I want an apiary site where I can drive or pull a garden cart into the apiary all year long. If the area can be plowed of snow in the winter, the bees will be easier to check for their food supply. One neighbor keeps suggesting a used golf cart, with a small bed on the back, something that can be plugged in and used upon demand to run out and check the bees, carry supplies and feed, or whatever else the bees might require. There is a great deal of variety in the location and positioning of bee colonies.

Next month we will discuss the question: How and where will you get your bees?

Full disclosure time: Dr. Connor's firm, Wicwas Press, is the editor and publisher of Caron's *Honey Bee Biology and Beekeeping*, available from most bee supply companies and from www.wicwas.com.

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