

# QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK

Larry Connor

*If you aren't asking these questions I worry about your future success.*

New beekeepers, and those thinking about getting bees, ask a lot of questions. Frankly, if they don't, I worry about their long-term success as beekeepers. With the wide range of pests, diseases and parasites combating the contemporary beekeeper, it is important everyone stay informed on the latest information. As a person learns beekeeping it is beneficial to grasp a wide range of intellectual, practical and always essential concepts that will guide them through their beekeeping experience. This is true if you keep only two colonies, or 20,000.

This article is based on questions new and small-scale beekeepers ask, or should, as they start with bees. Beekeepers must focus first on the challenges of deciding to get bees and where and when to get them. They then must move into core bee and beekeeper issues, like how do I know it is time to put on my supers? It includes some of the information you will need if you become a small business with your bees, selling honey, providing pollination services to area farms or wildlife preserves, and even some directions about record keeping, finances and taxes. Sometimes you will need to find someone who is able to 'decode' some high-level bee science to see how it affects bees and the decisions we make as beekeepers. And if you add some fluff and laughter, that is okay too, since it is important to keep beekeeping a lot of fun.

If you are thinking about getting a hive or two of bees, keep reading. If you are a 12 x 12 beekeeper – kept 12 hives for 12 years, this is for you too. Enjoy!

## Can I keep bees?

The decision to keep bees can be sorted out into several areas.

First, you need to be able to lift 40-80 pounds when the honey supers are full, although we will talk about smaller, and thus lighter, equipment options. Even wheelchair-bound beekeepers need occasional help with some of the heavy lifting, but otherwise can use a series of ramps and lifting aides to help them check their bees. You can plan to ask for help too, or even pay someone to do the lifting you cannot. Many people start keeping bees in retirement, and should keep the weight limits lower 'for when we get old.' In the past few years there are more and more women entering beekeeping, and the physical lifting is a big concern for some of them.

Second, you need to think about the environment where you plan to keep bees. Bees can and are kept in small city lots, on the tops of large buildings in urban area, and are carefully camouflaged from the public

and neighbors with the use of fences, vegetation and thoughtful placement. That is a great development. Yet I have had new beekeepers admit that one of the objectives of keeping bees was the escalating and continued annoyance of a feuding neighbor. I'd like to keep the bees out of property line wars, since it does nothing to promote the image of a highly beneficial but potentially stinging insect, and can bring on some anti-bee legislation or restrictions. There are some places where folks should not start a colony of bees, and the use of beekeeping to annoy a feuding neighbor is not fair to the bees or to the beekeeping community. Such battles almost always end up poorly for the bees and the beekeepers.

Third, a member of your family may be allergic to bee stings, and probably already carries an Epi-Pen R in case of stings. That does not mean you cannot keep bees, but you should



10 frame size hives in front on the right, and 8 frame size hives, in back on the left.

# Can I Keep Bees? Where Do I Put Colonies? What Type Of Hive Should I Buy?

speak to experienced beekeepers and minimize the opportunities and risk of stings. That may be as simple as keeping bees on a friend's farm. Many people are looking for beehives for their small farms and are happy to host a small-scale beekeeper. This has been very evident since the appearance of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), with a growing number of property owners wanting bees on the property for "for the environment." I suggest you be very clear as to the ownership of the hives, the bees, the honey and other products they produce. Also make sure any pollination service is addressed as either part of the right to place the bees or that a fee will be paid to the beekeeper.

If you are curious about nature, enjoy working outside, and have a natural interest in the way the world works, you should keep bees. If you like to eat honey, and cook with honey, and make mead from honey, then you should keep bees. If you have a wonderful garden and need to provide pollination for your berries, fruits and vegetables, you should keep bees. If you want something exciting to do in your life, you should keep bees. If you are a teacher, and want to share the world with your students, you should keep bees. If you are ready



Nearby neighbors can be a concern when bees decide to be antisocial.

for an amazing adventure in life, and have already climbed tall mountains, swum in deep seas, and jumped from airplanes, keeping bees may be the greatest thrill you will every have.

## Where to put colonies

Colony placement can be pretty easy for most small-lot property owners. If you are restricted to a rooftop or a 20x30 ft backyard, you will want to locate the bees so they face south to get the warming sun, and are protected from wind. They should not be placed so that the bees will be forced to fly where humans, dogs and other animals are forced to walk or are confined. A dog in a run is such a case, but don't forget about Aunt Tillie in her walker, and her inability to move very fast if the bees become antisocial.

In suburban and rural locations, I recommend locations that are air and water drained, have a good southern or eastern exposure, and that can be reached after it rains or during the Winter. I don't recommend moving bees by boat, but you can snowshoe into the apiary to check on food stores after a big snow. That can be important if you get a lot of snow in your area.

Bear populations are exploding in all of North America and consider this when you place your bees. Keeping bees nearer to humans will help, but not eliminate bear feeding on bees and their stored honey and developing brood. Check with the local ag agent or sheriff to see if there is a problem with bears in the area where you want to place your bees. If bears are in the area, you can consider putting up an electric fence, or perhaps keeping the bees near the house or barn with a wood fence around the bees. The bees will have no trouble flying over the fence.

Other forms of vandalism can be managed by putting the bees in locations where they are not seen from the road and do not 'advertise' themselves by bright white paint. Some beekeepers stain the hives to match buildings and fences on the

property. Others use the brightest and cheapest paint they can find to help with colony orientation, but then locate the bees in such a way that they are easy to access but cannot be seen from the road or by hikers.

## What type of beehive should I buy?

In North America nearly all the bee hives are based on the Langstroth movable frame hive, usually in 10 frame sizes. There was a period of many hive types in America over 100 years ago that was standardized by major bee equipment manufacturers. The Langstroth is sold in three depths, Deep, Medium and Shallow. There are several configurations for these. Many beekeepers start with two Deep hive bodies for the brood chamber and then multiple Medium hives for honey supers. Others use only Medium equipment. Shallow equipment is popular with some beekeepers for honey production, but I think we can deal with just Deep and Medium equipment just as well.

There is a move by many beekeepers to keep eight-frame hives rather than 10-frame units. This is a nice feature for older and female beekeepers as well as anyone who wants less weight to lift. I want more beekeepers to consider eight-frame hives because I believe they better fit the natural shape of colonies in bee trees and natural nest sites. Part of my logic is based on the observation that many colonies do not use the outside frames of the 10-frame colony, and the honey supers are often empty at the outside in all but the strongest nectar flow. The eight-frame unit means that there is 20% less volume for the bees to manage, which may mean greater energy savings by the highly efficient hive inside.

The downside of eight-frame hives is their resale value. In some areas the eight-frame equipment is harder to sell. But with more and more older and female beekeepers getting started and trying to expand, the eight-frame box may be the way to go. And if you plan to keep bees forever, resale issues are not important, right?

A small but highly passionate group of stationary (non-migratory) beekeepers use the top-bar hives. These can be made inexpensively with recycled materials (their original intent when developed for sustain-

able agriculture in Africa). But now there are elaborate and expensive models on the market. I think that a top-bar hive should be much less expensive than a Langstroth hive. The top-bar hives have frames with tops only, and no side or bottom boards. They are harder to move and remove honey from. Most beekeepers with top-bar hives are cut comb producers, and that is a premium product. The frames in these hives cannot be uncapped and extracted like in the Langstroth hives.

Biologically, top-bar colonies want to move up as do all colonies, so it may be harder to Winter top bar colonies in cold, northern locations. There are methods of supering top-bar colonies but that makes me think you might as well go Langstroth.

Two questions you need to ask before you buy your first beehive or plan a large expansion:

What is for sale in your area? Can you obtain replacement parts and new equipment? There have been a number of specialty hives developed over the years and the ultimate problem seems to be in your ability to get new parts when old ones give way. That may not sound like a big problem, but in 10 or 20 years, it could cause some serious regret.



Top Bar Hive. (Melanie Kirby photo)

What will work for you? If you are not a very independent or adventure-some type, keep with the Langstroth equipment. The industry is built on such colonies, especially for liquid honey production. But if you just want a few hives and are willing to play a bit, and do some research about the bees, maybe the top-bar hive is okay for you. You will be a

comb-honey producing beekeeper. You will need to rely on swarms and packages to start your hives (although you could shake bees from a strong hive into a top bar hive to get it started).

Check [www.wicwas.com](http://www.wicwas.com) for Dr. Connor's three Essentials books, or ask for them at your local bee supply dealership.

## Our new products are here!!

at some great prices!!

### Smokers

Lights easy; smokes long.....\$27.75

Hive tools .....\$ 3.48

### Bee suits

High quality full suit with attached veil comes in five sizes with all your favorite features.....\$65.00 (any size)

### Gloves

Full sleeve; flexible, washable, goat skin leather.....\$14.95

### Also:

- Honey-B-Healthy
- Nails
- Eyelets, wire, support pins
- Essential oil/thymol packets
- Protein patties

### Ask about:

- all 10-Frame, 8-Frame, 5-Frame woodenware
- our dealership program
- a free catalog



"Our saw cuts = your price cuts"

**BEELINE**  
APIARIES & WOODENWARE

5765 Main Rd.  
Bedford, PA 15522-4856  
Phone: (814) 585-4699  
Fax: (814) 847-9350  
Email:  
beeline@abc.mailbox.net



View our catalog and order online at  
[www.honeybeehabitat.com](http://www.honeybeehabitat.com)

## SIMPSON'S BEE SUPPLY

Classic Glass & Plastic Jars

PIERCO Frames

New Honey Filled Candy

15642 Tiger Valley Road • Danville, OH 43014

740.599.7914

[cwsimpson@embarqmail.com](mailto:cwsimpson@embarqmail.com)

[www.simpsonsbeesupply.com](http://www.simpsonsbeesupply.com)

Call Now For 2010 Packages!

**WE DELIVER**

## Beekeeping With Twenty-Five Hives

Step by Step, taking your hobby to the next level for fun and profitability.

Read sample chapters on-line  
<http://www.25hives.homestead.com>

or write:

3721 North High Street  
Jackson, MO 63755