

# What Should I Buy?

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There are both advantages and disadvantages to the three major options available for purchasing beehives (A hive is the combined equipment with bees installed, or ready to be installed). These are (1) the purchase of full-sized colonies, (2) (also called nuclei), nukes, nucs, increase, set-offs, splits, and divides, and (3) packaged bees. Here is a summary of the pros and cons:

**Full-sized colonies** – This may be the best and fastest way to obtain a colony of bees, and may initially be the most expensive, but puts you into full colony ownership from the start of your beekeeping career. Look for a local beekeeper who will deliver, or help you move, the bees to the site you have selected for bees. The location should be solid and level, with concrete, brick or pressure-treated wood used to raise the hive off the ground. Look for a colony with a minimum of two deep hive bodies (10 or eight frame units), or the equivalent in medium depth boxes (usually three). The colony should be new or nearly new (perhaps put into use the previous bee season). The frames should be nailed or stapled and glued, and the foundation firmly installed and has been in the hive long enough for all the combs to be drawn out (where the bees have added beeswax to the hexagon template). If you obtain more equipment, such as honey supers, this is good, but expect to pay more for this. If you purchase the colony after a nectar flow, the price may include the honey crop (you should pay more) but you may be able to harvest some of the honey from the hive and recover part of your investment.

On the negative side, full-sized colonies can be diseased with one or more of several bee diseases and/or have a high number of parasitic mites. The beekeeper should be able to ex-

plain the treatment plan history (chemical or non-chemical) that has been used on this colony. In some areas, state and provincial bee inspectors must, by law, provide certification that the colony is disease and mite free or has been inspected and offer the results.

Purchase of an overwintered colony in the Spring buildup period will provide you with the chance to make up new colonies, called increase colonies, during the Spring and into the Summer months – if the colony is strong and is being fed to stimulate growth or it is a 'normal' season and food is coming in at a rate to promote growth. This is advanced beekeeping in the eyes of many instructors, but it is not especially difficult (perhaps a bit daunting), but you can do it if you have a good teacher-mentor-trainer helping you with your beekeeping. Ironically, purchase of a full sized colony in the Spring of the season has the potential of giving you many colonies at the end of the year, but only if you comprehend what is happening to the bees and work wisely to provide good management of the new colonies. If you do not follow standard practices, you may lose all the bees and the money you paid for them. No refunds, so buyers beware!

**Increase or Nucleus Hives** – From Florida to Canada beekeepers make new colonies in the late Winter and Spring by making increase colonies. This is standard practice for large-scale professional beekeepers, allowing operations to divide an overwintered colony into two to five colonies by separating some of the frames of bees, brood and honey into smaller colonies and giving each new colony a queen cell, virgin queen or mated queen.

These colonies are offered for sale by a number of beekeepers. Northern area beekeepers make



*Installing a package is generally safe and uncomplicated. However, without prior experience or training, or a mentor to help, this means of beginning beekeeping can go astray.*



*A full sized colony, sitting next to a nuc, for comparison.*



*Buying full sized colonies gets you going fast, but these colonies can arrive with their own set of problems. Be sure to have them inspected by a knowledgeable beekeeper or inspector before you buy, rather than after.*



*An easy-to-capture free hanging swarm is an ideal way to get free bees...but know what you are getting, and how to get them home.*



up increase colonies in the early to mid Spring by purchasing Sunbelt queens, feeding heavily and selling the colonies available several weeks later, once the queen is mated, laying and the colony is stronger. Northern beekeepers who produce queens for themselves, or use natural swarm cells, will have these increase colonies available later in the Spring. This may result missing the early nectar crop (which the bees convert into either more bees or surplus honey). New beekeepers must learn where and when their major nectar flows happen in their area, and listen to their trainer for an ideal suggested time of purchase of nuclei hives.

When you obtain your nucleus it will contain (hopefully) three to five frames of bees and brood in all stages (eggs, larvae and pupae). There should be a wide coverage of worker bees over all the frames. Look for newer combs (used one or two seasons) with well drawn beeswax comb. There should not be a large area of drone brood on this comb, since these colonies are too small for heavy drone production. The queen could either be one that was overwintered in a nucleus, or produced from a number of methods that current Spring. Ask about the history of the queen. If you want local stock, make sure that the queen was raised locally, since it is very easy to get queens from warmer places to make up the first batch of increase. This is not a criticism, but some people have expectations and they are not always possible to meet! Have your trainer mark the thorax of the queen with a spot of paint so you can spot her as you work your hives. You can learn how to do this by practicing on a few drones – but only after you are 100% sure you can tell them apart!

In the past I have observed beekeeping operations using a questionable business model to get rid of old, often damaged, brood combs by making up increase colonies with them. Again, if this gives you a good price, it may be fine, but the older the comb, the greater the chance it carries agricultural and apiary-related pesticides, and has damaged areas. Again, this is where an experienced teacher can be a great help in looking at the frames and bees to make sure they are suitable for purchase.

**Packaged Bees** – The least ex-

pensive method of obtaining colonies is to arrange for delivery of Sunbelt packages of bees. These are usually two or three pounds of young nurse and house bees and a new (and foreign to the workers) queen that has just started to lay eggs. These bees must be moved from Sunbelt locations and delivered to your area by a local beekeeper or by the U.S. Postal Service. They cannot be shipped to Canada from the United States.

The biggest down side of packaged bees is the fact that this is an unbalanced unit subjected to the stress of travel over great distances. There is no drawn comb or brood in the hive, the queen is young and often not fully matured, and the bees are often subjected to stressful conditions while in transit – from overheating to Spring blizzards!

After packaged bees are installed early in the season and feeding and natural nectar and pollen flows occur in the right amount at the right time, in just six weeks or sooner they are ready for a second hive body. When conditions are poor, the bees arrive weakened or dead, fail to buildup due to early Spring weather, the queen fails and the colony becomes hopelessly queenless, and other problems. Few package bee producers guarantee live delivery and successful installation, so the risk is all in the hands of the buyer. This can be a great concern when the purchaser is new to beekeeping and is working alone. I have started to call these “drive by beekeepers”, since they drive by the pickup spot to get their bees, and then take them home. They have not had training and are not working with an experienced beekeeper. They may let the bees stay in the package for up to two weeks and then complain that the bees are not lookin’ too good. I really discourage this practice, since it does few people any good. Even the packaged bee producers will challenge these drive by beekeepers since they are often dangerously ignorant. Get some training whichever method you use. Take a class, find a mentor. This is a great way to insure your success in the first year of beekeeping, and your continued success in future years, since you started out with a good instructor/mentor.

#### **Free Bees**

Okay, true confession time. I started writing this article at my

desk in Michigan, but I am finishing it by a pool overlooking Buck Island (A U.S. Federal Monument with an underground trail for snorkelers) in St. Croix. Yes, I am wearing swim trunks while yet another storm hits the Mainland U.S., but deadlines must be honored. I just finished a three-day class on queen rearing for Islanders. Most of the bees on the Virgin Islands are mostly African, and it is the hope of the organizers to move toward some sort of stock improvement program. The first step is to teach some queen rearing.

Many of the Islanders increase their colony numbers by removing swarms from buildings. Some are good colonies, and some are not very useful. They use thin electrical wire to fasten the pieces of comb to the top bar frames, a system which is pretty popular here.

Removing bees from buildings, catching swarms, and other practices are methods beekeepers can get bees without spending any money, but the practice is not always free even if you charge the property owner for the service. Why? Lost wages, travel costs of a truck or car, and poor success rates can be part of this. So I suggest you let the more experienced beekeepers do the removals, or ‘cut-outs’ as they are often called.

Free hanging swarms are much easier to capture, especially if the bees cooperate and the swarm is reachable from the ground. Once you start with bees you can get on a ‘Swarm List’ at the local offices of government, extension and the fire and police departments. Some years there are many swarms, and if you have time away from work (or do not have a job – or one like mine), this is an excellent way to get more colonies without spending money out-of-pocket.

Put some trust in the advice of your trainer. Unless they have a vested commercial interest in one of the systems described here, they should be able to direct you to the choice that will work in your area. **BC**

*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. And while another tropical queen rearing class is not on the books as of today, there are three scheduled in MI and one in CT this Spring and Summer. If there is still room, we would like to have people learn about this vital part of beekeeping.*