

ALL ABOUT BEEKEEPING

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WHEN SHOULD I START MY HIVE?

Honeybees are entirely behavior-dependent on the climate in which they live. Timing for beginning a hive will vary depending on your local climate and geography. Read widely and connect with local beekeepers and beekeeping groups specific to your area to learn how others have found success.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, the right time to start a hive is early spring between late March and early May. As the chance of frost lessens or stops, early flowers will appear, giving your bees the ability to collect nectar and pollen. We suggest using autumn and winter to do all of your research and planning.

Demand for beehives and bees is on the rise, and often it will be too late to get started if you haven't secured a source for bees by January or February. Once spring arrives, you will want to be completely prepared for your bees to arrive with all of your equipment ready and your hive in place on your property. You will want to feel confident and versed about the task at hand!

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

As a beginning beekeeper you will always be learning. If you stop learning you're doing it wrong! As a natural beekeeper you are joining an ever-growing and changing beekeeping subculture that is still not understood by the larger beekeeping community. You may be scoffed at or ridiculed for your choice of hive designs or methods, but take comfort in the fact that a shift toward treatment-free, bee-friendly beekeeping is beginning, even among long-time traditional beekeepers.

Join a local beekeeping organization, even if they don't prefer your methods or beekeeping philosophy. Work to educate them on your methods and you may win a convert. There is also a lot to learn from long-time beekeepers despite some of their disinterest in top bar or Warre beekeeping.

If you've just purchased a hive, congratulations! Your bees now have a natural and beautiful space to call home. Your next step is to equip yourself with some beekeeping essentials so you're not entering the beekeeping arena empty-handed.

There is an array of key tools that will make your hive checks safer, easier and more effective. From sting protection to smokers, we have everything you need to launch and maintain your hive.

We recommend the following equipment for all new beekeepers using any style of hive:

HIVE TOOL

Your hive tool is one of your most critical pieces of equipment. Bees glue everything in the hive together with their resin-like propolis. This requires the beekeeper to pry the seal open with a hive tool. A hive tool allows you to detach comb from hive sides, cut and scrape propolis, and pry frames. Our ultimate hive tool (pictured) is our premium option. It's hand-forged in Portland, Oregon from 1/4" steel and is engraved with the Bee Thinking logo.

Our tool is based on the "Bill Wood Comb Knife", but has the added benefit of incorporating a traditional hive tool on one end. Having fallen in love with the original comb knife, but tired of carrying around a traditional hive tool for situations where prying is needed, we decided to combine the two!

Whether you're using a horizontal top bar hive, a Warre hive, or a foundationless Langstroth, this is an incredibly useful tool that you'll use constantly. We offer a few other value options as well.

SMOKER

A smoker is an invaluable tool for all beekeepers as it makes aggressive bees more docile. Primarily, smoke makes honeybees believe there may be a wildfire nearby. This prompts them to eat as much honey as they can in preparation for a potential move. Honeybees are more docile with a full stomach due to physical difficulty in tipping their abdomens up to sting.

Smoke also masks the alarm pheromone given off by guard bees, minimizing the defensive reactions of the colony. Honeybee alarm pheromone smells like banana candy, so if you smell bananas in your hive, it's time for another puff of smoke. Similarly, beekeepers should not eat bananas directly before getting into a hive, since it may be perceived by your bees as alarm pheromone.

Our American Smoker is made of stainless steel and it includes a wrap-around heat shield and grate at the bottom to improve burning.

JACKET WITH HAT VEIL

Bees tend to attack the face of mammalian intruders, thus, a jacket with a veil is an essential tool for beekeepers. Bees have CO₂ receptors on their antennae, which allow them to detect our exhalations, and respond aggressively. This ability developed to protect the hive against the threat of bears. Common folklore states that bees sense fear, but really they are sensing fear behavior. If one is nervous around bees, they may breathe more heavily, which can lead to stings. Many experienced beekeepers do not wear any gear, and have become so comfortable around their bees, they can behave calmly and not get stung. We recommend all beginners use at least a veil, though we also offer hat/veil combinations with ventilated and non-ventilated jackets and full body bee suits for additional protection.

GLOVES

Another fear-sensing behavior bees pick up on is shaky or fumbling hands. Confident, experienced beekeepers often do not wear them to maximize their maneuverability, but we suggest all beginners start with gloves as a safeguard. Beekeeping gloves are made of soft leather or other tough but flexible materials to protect against stings without jeopardizing comfort. Our leather beekeeping gloves feature ventilation just above the wrist, which is a lifesaver on a hot day!

BEE BRUSH

More useful than you would imagine, the bee brush can be used to gently move the bees off of comb or other places you don't want them to be. This is an essential tool for honey harvest, repairing broken comb, and sometimes for swarm removal. Keep in mind that the bees HATE the brush and you will find them stinging it mercilessly as you use it, so use it sparingly.

BOOKS

Beekeeping is a dynamic and ever-changing experience that requires research, lots of beekeeping books, and patience. Considering all the environmental factors that affect your honeybees, and the fact that every honeybee colony is different, you may see something different every time you get into your hive. In order to make appropriate management decisions, beekeepers must be flexible in their ability to figure out why bees are behaving a certain way, and how certain actions may impact their well being.

We offer an array of beekeeping books written by experts in the field. Reading as much as possible will help to give you a solid understanding of beekeeping best practices and help you to make sometimes tough decisions.

BEEKEEPING STARTER KIT

Every beekeeper has their essential toolkit. For beginners, we recommend our Beekeeping Starter Kit which includes all essential beekeeping equipment listed above (except books) in one bundle, which comes at a better value than buying each piece individually.

Beekeeping Starter Kit

ou will populate your hive in the spring. Here in the Pacific Northwest, that means April through early June. The increasing popularity of beekeeping, however, requires that bees be purchased, reserved, or planned for months in advance. We recommend securing your source for bees by January if you plan to start a hive the following spring.

Below are some of the most common ways to obtain honeybees for your hive.

SWARMS

Swarming is the natural method honeybee colonies reproduce as a whole. The original colony replaces the old queen, who leaves the hive with half the worker bees and as much honey as they can carry. Swarm clusters land on a structure near their original hive location and scout bees leave the cluster in search of a new hive location. It is in this stage that swarms can be captured and used to populate an empty hive. Swarms are ready to start building comb within their new home immediately.

Swarms are also local to the area they were found in. They are guaranteed to have survived the winter in that climate, and were strong enough to split in early spring. This method of obtaining bees aids in the goal of propagating strong genetics for local honeybee populations. We have had the greatest success with bees caught from swarms in our apiary, and believe that swarms fare better than bees trucked across the country in packages.

BAIT & TRAP

Bait and Trap Bees

When scout bees find a suitable hive location, they return to the cluster, and direct the swarm to the new hive location with the waggle dance. Once the swarm reaches their destination, the first worker bees on the premises gather at the entrance and fan their nasonov glands, releasing scout pheromone

to direct the rest of the bees into the new hive. This pheromone resembles the scent of lemongrass oil, and beekeepers can use small amounts of the oil in their hives or in swarm traps to lure in a swarm.

Check out these books for more information about how swarms find new hive locations, and about setting swarm traps.

Honeybee packages are screened boxes that contain a single inseminated-queen in a cage, and 3 pounds of worker bees (about 10,000 individuals). Packages come from breeders, and can be used to populate any hive style. They sell quickly, so find an apiary near you to reserve one as early as possible for a guaranteed source of bees for the season.

Bee Packages

NUCLEUS BOXES

A nucleus colony, or NUC, is essentially a mini-hive with 3-5 built out frames of honey and brood with 1 queen and enough worker bees to maintain and expand the hive. They are available from breeders and apiaries, and most commonly come as deep Langstroth frames in a wooden or cardboard box. These frames can be transferred into full-sized deep Langstroth hive boxes, and often build up faster than packages since they already have eggs, larvae and honey stores.

Empty nuc boxes make great swarm catching containers. You can allow your swarm to start building comb in the NUC box and transfer the comb into a compatible hive, rather than needing to dump a swarm into their permanent hive right away. We make top bar nucleus boxes, and deep Langstroth nucleus boxes.

SPLITS

A method used by beekeepers of all hive styles to populate new hives is by splitting strong existing colonies. Splits are done by moving frames or top bars of brood including unhatched eggs, honey, and nurse bees from a full colony to a new hive. Make sure the old and new hives have either an existing queen, or unhatched eggs; the queenless hive can raise a new queen by feeding an larvae from an unhatched egg only royal jelly. Once the egg has hatched and has already been fed bee bread, the bee is destined to be a worker, and cannot be made into a queen. Some beekeepers choose to buy a queen and add her to the queenless colony. We don't use this method because the colony can requeen on their own, and often we don't support the methods used to raise and inseminate most queens.