

Keeping Honey Bees

Keeping honey bees is a commitment to regular inspections of the hive and a programme of action throughout the year. It is not like keeping fish in a pond that require little more than regular feeding. Incorrectly managed honey bees will inevitably die and before they do are likely to cause problems for neighbours by swarming. Opening a beehive, inspecting the frames of bees and making the correct decision on what you see is a balance between knowledge and experience. For the novice, nothing can replace practical tuition from an experienced and competent beekeeper. Before obtaining a colony of bees we suggest joining your local Beekeepers Association, learning about the theory by reading recommended works and gaining practical experience with theory and practical beekeeping courses. Time taken over the early stages and making sure beekeeping is for you will be invaluable later.

Can I keep Bees?

Anyone who has the interest and temperament can keep bees, except a tiny minority who are allergic to bee stings and for whom it could be fatal. A garden or small holding is not essential, some beekeepers in cities keep bees successfully on the roofs of buildings, garage roofs, and lofts. However beekeepers have a responsibility to ensure that their bees do not cause alarm or inconvenience to neighbours and these locations wouldn't be recommended for the beginner.

Siting the Bee Hive

The main considerations when siting a hive are

- Easy access for the beekeeper.
- A flight path that will not annoy or concern neighbours or other members of the public.
- Protection from strong winds and driving rain.
- Not in deep shade from overhanging trees.
- Firm ground with good drainage.

Bees will need access to water. But will drown in a bucket or paddling pool. A film of slow running or puddled water on a rock or stone is ideal.

What will I need?

The following is a guide to the essentials. There are invariably a number of options available depending upon your preference and budget. For the beginner making a choice can be confusing, Association members can help to explain the options.

Beekeeping Protective Clothing

Each bee that stings dies but the sting leaves a chemical signal that other bees then target. Bees will defend their hive and will sting any intruder including you. It is necessary therefore to have certain protective clothing. The correct clothing will give the novice beekeeper confidence when working with bees. Most beekeepers wear a full bee suit which has an integral hood and veil. It is also necessary to purchase a pair of gloves and, because bees attack exposed ankles and also climb upwards most beekeepers tuck the trouser legs of their suit into wellington boots.



Bee Smoker

Used properly, the smoker sends the bees to their combs to fill up on honey ready to flee what could be, as far as they are concerned, a forest fire. They are then less aggressive and can be kept under control during manipulations. It is best to obtain a smoker with a fairly large firebox, so you do not have to keep topping it up with fuel. The fuel for the smoker should be slow cool burning materials like hessian, hay or wood chippings although corrugated cardboard can also be used.



Hive Tool

Bees glue any contacting surface in the hive with propolis. It is necessary when carrying out manipulations to separate components in the hive, the most efficient tool for this task is a hive tool.



Feeder

Bees can starve. Feeders are used to supply sugar syrup to colonies. This includes emergency feeding in spring, autumn feeding to augment the natural honey stores the bees have for winter, or feeding to help a small colony or swarm to develop.

There are many types of feeders designed for lower or higher capacity feeding of the bees. The type shown in the illustration is a popular general purpose feeder.



The above covers the basics but you will benefit from, and obtain, many other pieces of equipment for example queen cages and marker pen.

Bee Hive

Whenever most people think of a bee hive they visualize the gabled roof WBC hive. Few beekeepers use these hives now. It has inner and outer walls, and there are many extra components to handle and maintain. They are also more expensive to purchase than the more modern hive. The modern hive consists of

FLOOR This is a shallow tray with a gap at one end which forms the hive entrance. The hive entrance can be reduced with a smaller entrance block, and also mouse guards can be fitted for winter.

BROOD BOX This is the box where the queen lays her eggs and the young bees develop. It is open top and bottom, it has rebated sides, from which removable wooden frames are hung. These frames contain wax combs. The brood box has the same external dimensions as the floor.

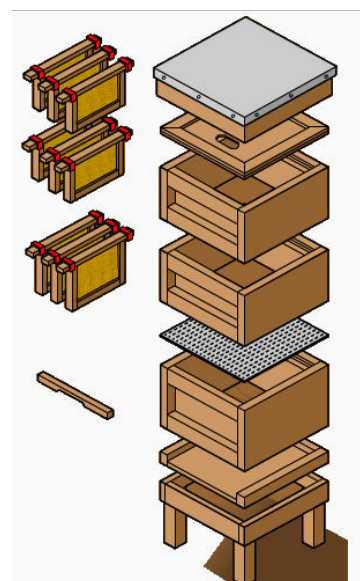
QUEEN EXCLUDER This is a grill located between the brood box and supers. It allows worker bees to pass through, but due to the size of the grill does not allow drone bees or the queen to pass. This stops the queen laying eggs in the super boxes, which are for honey storage.

SUPERS During the summer you would normally expect two or three super boxes to be placed on top of the brood box. This is where the majority of the honey is stored by the bees. The super boxes are the same exterior dimensions as the brood box, with the same rebate and frames of comb, but both box and frames are shallower.

CROWN BOARD Placed on top of the hive, under the roof, and can have a hole for a feeder to be fitted, or holes for bee escapes used when clearing bees from supers before they are removed for the honey extraction.

ROOF This keeps the interior of the hive dry.

The most popular hive in the UK is the National but larger and smaller hives are available.



The Bees

When obtaining bees you will be getting a queen and tens of thousands of workers. Bees are best obtained early in the 'season', April or May, when someone else will have been

responsible for getting the bees through the winter and you can assess the strength of the colony, manage them through the following months with the benefit of the honey harvest. Bees can be bought as a full hive. The second option is to purchase a four or frame 'nucleus' of bees, which will be easier for the complete beginner to manage and gradually build up to a full colony. You will then need to prepare them for the winter. The best source of information on obtaining bees is probably the local Beekeepers Association. The Pembrokeshire Beekeepers' Auction which takes place at the beginning of May each year is a good source of bees.

The cheapest way to start is with a swarm, but this is reliant on chance. Local beekeepers will be the best informed on where one may be obtained.

Purchasing a nucleus may be the best option for the new beekeeper. A small colony will be easier to handle, and as the colony builds, so will your experience.

Managing Problems

The press has been full of stories about the disappearance of the honey bee and there is speculation about the reasons for these losses. While some of the current problems are new beekeeping has had to deal with problems to at least back to the beginning of the twentieth century when an estimated 80% of the colonies in the UK were lost.

Problems include:

- Swarming
- Losing the queen or an infertile queen
- Varroosis
- Diseases
- Starvation.

It is essential to check the hives regularly, once every 8 days is ideal during the season to know what to look for and what action to take if problems are found or suspected.

Members of Pembrokeshire Beekeepers Association can call upon more experienced beekeepers for advice.

Books

There are it has been said more books written about honey bees than any other creature excluding man himself. **Guide to Bees and Honey by Ted Hooper** is for many the most practical and comprehensive publication. This book acts as a practical guide for beekeepers of any experience, and also has information that a prospective beekeeper will find useful. Also recommended is **Teach Yourself Beekeeping by Adrian & Claire Waring**. Short reviews of a few easily obtainable books is available on the internet at <http://pembsbeekeepers.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/book-reviews.pdf>

Education, Training and Further Information

The Association supports beginners with an evening class and practical sessions at our own apiary. The evening class provides all the basic information you'll need to get started. Demand for courses has been high and we have a waiting list into next year.

Further information for the beginner can be found on the Association's website at <http://pembsbeekeepers.wordpress.com/beginners-reference/>

Elsewhere on the site are links to many other resources.