



British Beekeepers' Association

Getting Started in Beekeeping

This leaflet gives some general guidance to anyone who would like to take up the fascinating hobby of beekeeping but doesn't know where to start or what might be involved.

Where do I start?

Keeping bees healthy and productive requires knowledge and skill. Beekeeping is made much easier by joining a local Beekeepers' Association (BKA) where you should be given advice, tuition and support. Many BKAs run beginners' courses where you can learn some of the theory and gain valuable practical experience in their teaching apiary. Before you embark on the road to keeping bees it is advisable to handle a full colony on your own, whilst under supervision, and preferably on several occasions before buying any bees and equipment. BKAs are all voluntary organisations and skills and facilities may vary so we can do no more than generalise here. We know that a considerable number of new beekeepers give up soon after starting when they realise how much of a commitment is required or they find they do not enjoy handling bees.



How much will the equipment cost and where can I buy it?

The minimum equipment you will need for keeping bees is a suitable hive, some protective clothing, a smoker, a hive tool and bees. The cost of these will vary considerably depending on where you purchase them. With new equipment the quality and price varies; if you buy any used equipment there is the possibility of introducing disease problems. Advice should always be sought from your local BKA before buying any bees or equipment.

Will I be stung?

Yes, all beekeepers will receive the occasional sting. This could be accidental where you may squash a bee or, in the course of a colony inspection, you may receive an odd sting from even the most docile bees. Some bees are more feisty than others and this can be the result of bad handling or perhaps the weather or the genetic makeup of the bees themselves. Good handling skills should be taught by local BKAs. The responsible beekeeper will aim to keep docile bees and will replace the queen of aggressive colonies. Very few people are hypersensitive to bee stings but most will experience some degree of swelling or itching for a short time and then gradually become more immune as time goes on.



How much honey will I have?

Some beekeepers are more interested in the bees than the amount of honey they produce. Others will see honey production as a welcome return on a considerable investment. The amount of honey will vary with the season, and the district, but on average 30 - 50lbs (13kg-23kg) per hive may reasonably be expected, though it could be a lot more in a good year and nothing in a bad one.

Find a local Beekeepers' Association at:
www.bbka.org.uk/find-beekeeping-near-you



Where can I keep my bees?

A reasonably sized garden, an orchard or an odd corner on a farm are usually suitable. The direction a hive faces is not important but avoid placing bees facing onto a neighbour's property or near a footpath. Facing a hedge, fence or building will usually encourage bees to fly above head height and therefore avoid being a nuisance. The site should be dry and fairly open without being in full sun for long periods. Open woodland is good but dense woodland or thick undergrowth can be damp. In a residential area a garden or an allotment may be a possibility. The site should be easily accessible for moving bulky equipment and fenced against animals. You will need room to work and put hive parts and equipment down.



Where can I obtain bees and how much will they cost?

You can acquire bees on combs from other local beekeepers or your local BKA. It is a good idea to start with a nucleus which is a small colony on 3 – 5 frames but please note the previous advice about bees and queens. The price will vary depending on the locality, source and time of year but, as always, seek advice from your BKA. As a beginner you will be keen to have your first bees and it would make sense for you to seek advice from the experienced beekeepers in your BKA. Ask them to inspect any bees for you and to look especially for foulbrood diseases which are notifiable. The last thing a beginner wants to see is their first colony of bees being destroyed by the Bee Inspector. Be patient, it will repay you.

Please ask your local beekeepers' association for further information about their Taster Days and courses for beginners.

Suggested Introductory books for beginners:

"BBKA Guide to Beekeeping" by Dr Ivor Davis NDB
"The Haynes Manual of the Bee" by Claire Waring and Adrian Waring



Visit the **BBKA** website for more information about becoming a beekeeper:
www.bbka.org.uk

How much time does it take?

Beekeeping is a seasonal hobby so the time needed varies with the seasons. In the middle of winter there is practically nothing to do except to occasionally check your hives have not been disturbed and that the bees have sufficient stores. The busiest time is during the late spring and into summer when each hive should be checked every week or two depending on the methods you adopt. This need take no longer than an hour or so for two or three hives in the active season to control swarming. Don't forget to take into account the time you will spend learning your beekeeping skills at the local BKA. This will probably be much more time than you will spend on your own bees.

What bees should I buy?

Your BKA, or an experienced local beekeeper, may be able to help you obtain your first colony of bees. Locally sourced bees are likely to be hardier than recently imported stock. It is BBKA policy to recommend local bees and not to use imported bees and queens. This helps to prevent any possible importation of exotic pests and diseases and imported bees may not be adapted to our particular climatic conditions.



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