

So You Want to Keep Bees

**A Guide and Suggestions for
Prospective New Beekeepers**





Beekeeping is an incredibly fascinating and rewarding hobby, enjoyed by people of all ages from rural areas to the middle of big cities. However, it requires dedication and perseverance. We at the Nashville Area Beekeepers Association <http://nashbee.org> can make the learning process easier for you and help you succeed.

Why Do People Keep Bees?

- **It's fun and extremely interesting**---Bees are fascinating insects and will never cease to amaze you. Even after years as a beekeeper, you will continue to learn new things and face new challenges.
- **Bees are key to our ecosystem and food supply**---Pollinating insects, especially honey bees and solitary bees, are critical to our ecosystem. Most flowering plants, trees, vegetables and flowers need help with pollination. Without pollination, they are not able to produce seeds and fruit. It is estimated that 1/3 of everything we eat is dependent on bees. With more

people on the planet and less land being farmed, agriculture must become more efficient. More bees may be the key.

- **Honey Bees Are threatened**---For a variety of reasons the population of bee colonies has declined in recent years. Agriculture in our state and in the nation lacks sufficient bee colonies for productive farming. And, it is not just agriculture that needs help with pollination. Most trees, shrubs, plants and flowers in the environment depend on pollinating insects. Once wild bee colonies did most of the pollination work; however, diseases and pests have decimated most wild bee colonies. Hobby beekeepers can be a great help.
- **Enjoy the outdoors and gardening**---Beekeeping is a natural fit for people who love the outdoors, want to help our environment and love gardening. You will find that if you keep bees, your fruits, vegetables and flowers will be much more prolific.

- **Great stress relief, a joy to watch & educational**---Most beekeepers will talk about the relaxation and stress relief from keeping bees; and how much they enjoy just watching their “girls” do their work. To be a good beekeeper, you need to be continually learning about bee biology and behavior.
- **Honey & bee’s wax**---Honey is the sweet reward for keeping bees. In late summer you remove honey for yourself and leave some behind for the bees to eat during the winter. Many beekeepers also use the wax produced to make candles and other products. Some beekeepers even harvest pollen collected by the bees.
- **Family tradition**---Many people are drawn to beekeeping because their parents or grandparents kept bees. This becomes a nostalgic connection for them.

- **Enjoy a challenge & learning**---If you enjoy a real challenge, then beekeeping may be for you. Also, people who are avid learners and have a high level of curiosity, often become good beekeepers.
- **Beekeepers like things that are “a bit-different”** --Beekeepers are not typically your “plain vanilla” type of person. They tend to like to explore things that are a bit out of the ordinary and are not afraid to try new & different things.

Beekeeping is a Challenge

Beekeeping at times requires hard work. A certain amount of heavy lifting is required. Preparation of hive components can at times be time consuming and it helps to have a basic understanding of “home repair” and woodworking. You must be able to pre-plan and do things when the bees need it, not when things are convenient for you. Continuous learning is essential.

Studying and learning are important if you are going to be successful. You must have a basic understanding of bee biology, anatomy, behavior, needs, stress factors, diseases & pests, how to harvest honey/wax, seasonal requirements, etc. Mentoring can help, but the bulk of the learning responsibility must be on you. In addition to studying and reading, hands-on and practical experience are key. Learn by doing when you can.

Start with two hives. First, as a beginner, we suggest you not start with just one hive. Two hives allow you to constantly compare one to the other, allowing early detection, when there is a problem. Also, you can use one hive to help the other.

Beekeeping **can be costly**. Yes, you can begin with two starter hives with bees and other basic equipment for about \$500+. However, you will soon discover that you will need to spend more in the first year for additional boxes, components and

equipment. More spending is required in future years.

You must be able to **deal with periodic failure**. In today's world of threats to bees due to pests, diseases, beekeeper errors, environmental issues, etc., you will have setbacks and you will have hives die. You need to be able to rebound and push ahead.

It is Not for Everyone

Nationally, it is estimated that 80% of new beekeepers quit within 2 years

We in the Nashville Area Beekeepers Association (NABA) view this as **totally unacceptable**. We want new NABA beekeepers to have a much, much lower drop-out rate. To be successful requires dedication, hard work, knowledge, research, persistence and help from fellow beekeepers.

Why Do People Quit Beekeeping?

- **Beekeeping is not like having a pet.** Beekeeping is substantially more involved than keeping a dog or a cat. Most everyone can keep a pet, but not everyone is cut out to be a beekeeper.
- **The learning curve is long and steep.** I have heard people with 5 full seasons keeping bees still described as “beginners” or “new bees”. Learning is continuous.
- **It is more expensive than imagined.** See the description earlier. People often think that they can spend a couple of hundred dollars and then the bees will take care of themselves. Not so. This is not the beekeeping done by your granddaddy.
- The **first few months can be deceptively easy** (the “Honey Moon” period). Bees obtained from a quality supplier can often go on “autopilot” for a few months, lulling the new beekeeper into a false sense of security. You must be involved in the cycle of life for the bees & manage accordingly.

- **More time is required than originally thought.** A fair amount of effort is required and it must be dictated by the seasons and the needs of the bees. Beekeepers often say that the “new bee year” begins in October and they spend a good deal of time from then-on preparing for the rush of activity that starts in March. If you are not ready in March, wait another year.
- It is **more work than was anticipated.** A hive box loaded with honey can weigh 50 lb. or more. The “physicality” requires that you, at times, lift and move these boxes.
- **Honey harvest expectations are not realistic** in the first year. A new hive typically needs one full season to get established. This means that in your first year you may get very little honey. After that, if managed properly, you could harvest as much as 100 lb. per hive. The priority in the first year must be to leave the bees sufficient honey for winter food.
- **Bee stings are not fun.** You will get stung; it is as simple as that. Honey bees are not

by nature aggressive, but they will protect their home, their children, their stored food and perceived threats to themselves. Protection of your face is necessary; you do not want to get stung in the eye/mouth/nose. So, always wear a veil. Careful and gentle beekeepers still get stung a couple of times a week during the peak season; it just goes with being a beekeeper. Most people who think they are “allergic to bee stings”, are not. Redness, pain, itching and swelling are normal for a couple of days with a bee sting. If you get one bee sting and it is life threatening (hives over the entire body, unable to breathe, etc.), then you are allergic. This can be very serious.

- **Underestimate mites & other pests.** You have to be your own “Vet”. In addition to needing to be knowledgeable in bee biology & behavior, you need to be your own “Bee Veterinarian”. Diseases must be promptly recognized and treated by the beekeeper. At the very least, you must recognize that things are “not normal” and ask for help. Failure to do this will cause the beekeeper to lose colonies.

- **Storage area.** You will need a storage area or shed to keep hive components during the winter and an area to assemble components.
- Bees are **subject to environmental conditions.** Bees are part of agriculture and living creatures, not an item made in a manufacturing plant. As such, their success and failures are, in-part, due to the weather and environmental conditions. Beekeepers must understand and deal with this.
- **Unhappy neighbors** can be a problem if not properly managed. Many people have an inordinate fear of bees. While bees can generally be kept in most places (rural, suburban, and urban), educating the neighbors can be key. Help the neighbors understand that bees are not by nature aggressive and when they fly in search of food it is generally 50-60 ft. in the air. Explain to them what you plan to do ahead of time and give them a tour of your hives. Give them honey after your harvest. Importantly, use good common sense in the placement and management of your

hives. When done with basic precautions and respecting your neighbors, hives can legally be located most anywhere. Check the governance documents of your homeowners association and local statutes; there could be restrictions.

How Do You Beat the Odds?

- **Be prepared when you start your hives in the Spring.** March-April is the time to start new hives. For beekeepers, this is “show time”. In the preceding Fall and Winter, prepare your equipment, order your bees and read-read-read.
- Having **two hives** is much better than just one for a beginner. It is hard for a beginner to recognize when there is a developing problem. Having two hives provides a good basis for comparison.
- **Diligent homework—Read, Study, Train.** Yes, a mentor is helpful. Yes, hands-on experience is essential. However, there is

no substitute for education on your part. This means studying of multiple text books and going to beginner bee school classes.

- **Make sure you have everything you need.** Studying and preparation are critical. When “show time” arrives in March, you must be totally ready to go both in terms of equipment and education.
- Seek a **mentor & hands-on training** through NABA. Our association has many mentoring and training programs. These involve personal mentors, post-meeting mentoring each month and monthly hands-on training at our Ellington Apiary. Take advantage of all of them to get advice from experienced beekeepers. Details at <http://nashbee.org> .
- Go to **NABA bee school & seminars.** We do a full beginner school each October. Should you not be able to attend the live school, we taped all lessons from the past two years that you can watch any time. The complete “virtual school” is available 24/7 on the NABA web site under the “member resources” tab.

- **Join NABA & attend meetings.** Take advantage of our “community of beekeepers” by joining NABA. All meetings involve training sessions and access to knowledgeable beekeepers. We normally meet the second Sunday of each month at Belmont University. See the web site for details. <http://nashbee.org>
- **Listen to those who are more experienced** and a reliable source. Seek out and listen to those who are experienced. While there are lots and lots of opinions out there, concentrate on those who are confirmed to be reliable.
- **Volunteer for NABA activities**---One of the very best ways to learn and meet experience beekeepers is to volunteer for our activities at schools, fairs, shows, group presentations, etc. You may not be a honey bee expert but you will certainly know more than a typical 6th grader. Importantly, you will have a chance to spend time with very experienced beekeepers.

- **Be persistent & committed**---You will need a dogmatic commitment to succeed. Give your best effort and you will succeed.
- **Be prepared to learn from failing.** All beekeepers will fail and you will lose bees periodically. Learn from your mistakes and move on. In today's environment you may lose 20-30% of your hives each year. Figure out what you did wrong.
- **Keep records.** Keep a record of what you do and the results. It has been said that "only a fool fails to learn from history". You must have a journal of what you did and what happened to capture and understand your beekeeping history. Only in this way can you get better.
- **Avoid "garbage information"** on the Internet and other places. Our former head bee scientist for Tennessee once said "80+% of the information about beekeeping on the internet is garbage." Stick to reliable people and reliable sources. Our association maintains a beekeeping library where quality books are available for check out at each NABA monthly meeting. The "Honey Bee Health

Coalition” provides the best, most reliable and scientifically accurate information on pests and diseases, particularly “Bee Enemy #1”, the Varroa Mite.

You Can Do This!!!!

- Be persistent in your self-education and dedication.
- Join the Nashville Area Beekeepers Association (NABA).
- Let NABA and our programs help you.
- Your tenacity will be rewarded.

If This Is Not For You

Many people are concerned about honey bees and the environment. However, you may not have the time, resources and capability to keep honey bees.

Well, there are many other interesting things you can do to help. Consider the following:

- Help a current beekeeper
- Plant a “pollinator garden”. Your local Master Gardener group can help.
- Keep solitary bees (like mason bees). This is much easier than having honey bees and they are terrific pollinators.
- Support beekeepers by buying local honey.
- Help with educational activities associated with pollinating insects.



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