

Q&A: What's It Take to Get Started in Beekeeping?

By Delaware Beekeepers Association, The Newsy Bee, July 2008

Q: How much time does it take to keep bees?

A: Beekeeping is a seasonal hobby, and therefore, the time varies with the seasons. In the winter, there is practically nothing to do except to occasionally check for physical damage or snow blocking the entrances. The busiest time is in the early summer when each hive should be checked weekly to prevent swarming, and to add additional honey supers. This need take no longer than a few minutes once you get the hang of it.

Q: Is beekeeping hard work?

A: Beekeeping does require some strength, and a bit of physical labor, although both handicapped people and blind people have been known to keep bees. There are ways of reducing the physical labor involved. Join the Delaware [or your local] Beekeepers Association and find out how.

Q: How much will it cost me to get started?

A: There are several bee supply houses that offer a variety of beginner kits. These contain all the equipment you will need to start your first hive. The woodenware can often be purchased pre-assembled. While these kits are handy, they tend to have some things that may not be needed by the beginner, and are a little expensive. They range in price from \$215 to more than \$300.

Q: What equipment do I need to start keeping bees?

A: First you will need the hive. This consists of a bottom board, two hive bodies with frames and foundation, three medium honey supers with frames and foundation, an inner cover, and an outer cover. Secondly, you will need a smoker and hive tool. Buy a large smoker with guard, and the long hive tool.

Q: Do I need a bee suit?

A; You will need some sting protection. You can buy a veil and gloves for about \$25, a full deluxe English type bee suit and gloves for around \$100, and several in between to fit your budget. While you may learn to shed your protection with time, good sting protection makes sense when you are just starting out.

Q: How much honey will I get?

A: That depends on the strength of the colony, and the weather. While the Delaware average is around 50 lbs, strong colonies on a good honey flow have been known to make 100 to 200 pounds per year.

Q: Will I get stung?

A: To come to the point...yes. But, it really isn't as bad as you think. Stings on the hands and arms don't really hurt much, if you learn to remove the sting properly. Some seasoned beekeepers actually enjoy the first stings of the year. It means that spring is surely here.

Q: What do I do if I get stung?

A: Bite your tongue, and pull out the stinger...quickly. Never grab the bulb (venom sac) of the stinger and pull. That squeezes all the venom into your skin, like a hypodermic syringe. Instead, scrape the stinger off with a fingernail, or the sharp edge of your hive tool. This grabs the shaft of the stinger, and pulls it out, leaving most of the venom in the sac.

Q: If I swell when stung, am I allergic?

A: No, swelling is the body's natural immune system at work. Some swelling is normal at first. With enough stings, swelling is non-existent.

Q: Where can I buy bees?

A: Most of the bee supply houses have bees for sale. There are some local producers who sell bees, and many suppliers are listed in the beekeeping periodicals.

Q: Can I keep bees in my garden?

A: Yes, you can. It is advisable that you use a gentle strain of bee, and have the entrance facing away from work areas. Sometimes a barrier such as a low fence or hedge placed ten feet in front of the hive will force the bees to fly up, and away from traveled areas of your property.

Q: Will bees bother my neighbors?

A: No, not usually. Remember to locate the bees' flight path away from traveled areas. Often, if the hives are hidden from view, no one knows they are there.