Frequently Asked Questions for Beginners (FAQs)

(Adapted from Dave Cushman's Website.)

For those thinking of starting, or have just started beekeeping

Beekeeping is not a hobby that you can start, then drop, such as stamp collecting or painting. It is irresponsible to acquire bees, then abandon them, as they could swarm and cause a nuisance to neighbors, get a disease or starve. In my opinion the would-be beekeeper needs to do some research and assess their own suitability to keep bees before buying any equipment. I assume you have made contact with a local bee club, handled a full colony of bees on several occasions and spoken to your family and neighbors. If you have done this preparation, the following FAQs should help you.

In some places you may think I'm hard hitting, but I have seen many a beginner who has suffered from duff information that has started them off down a road they have later changed at great cost and inconvenience. What isn’t often realized is that all beekeepers develop a system and everything they do should suit it. There are many ways of keeping bees and providing the thinking is sound and it fits what you are doing it will be fine. I have tried to give guidance that should suit all.

Q: What equipment do I need to start beekeeping?

A: A lot less than you will be told! Be careful of some of the lists available as they are often "standard" lists copied from elsewhere, with a lot of things you may never use. These will just clutter up your shed with junk. I think the best thing to do is to buy the absolute minimum, then add to it when you have decided that you actually need something. It is easy to buy things because you are told you need them, but often you don't. Be patient.

I think the minimum should be: Smoker, hive tool and protective clothing. See elsewhere for other equipment details, but a hive and feeder could be sourced after seeking sound advice.

Q: Should I buy a Beginners kit?

A: These are usually advertised as "All you need to get started" and to a degree they are, but there are often things you may not want or are of poor quality. They usually have fixed contents that can't be changed so you have them, whether you want them or not. This means you could have a book, frames, feeder, queen excluder, etc, that you have been advised against. It is easy to see what is included, then look at the catalog and see how much money you may "save", but in reality some of what's included could be cheap, shoddy imported kit, that won't last and not the same as you have priced.

Q: Where do I get my beekeeping equipment from?

A: Some clubs offer group purchases of equipment – support them if you can! Otherwise get recommendations for local and national suppliers. Buy local if you are able.. The MSBA has a list of suppliers on their website.

If you want to buy used equipment, the most important question to ask is why did the bees that were in the equipment die? There are some brood diseases that can continue to kill – even after the hive has been in storage for more than 50 years! If you decide that used equipment is what you want, have it looked at by someone who knows what diseased equipment looks like. The wooden part of the hive can be fairly easily be sanitized, the comb almost always should be discarded.

If you don’t have a club locally to advise you, the state Apiarist can inspect equipment for you. There is
Q: **How do I decide on what hive type to use?**

A: Oh dear! This can be very complex! The traditional hive in Maine is called a **Langstroth type hive**. It is available in different sizes, the most common being the 10 frame “deep” which describes the box used to make up the brood chamber. Two deep boxes usually make up the brood chamber, where the queen lays her eggs and the bees store the food that will see them through winter.

Underneath the brood chamber is the bottom board, sometimes made screened, sometimes not. On top of the brood chamber is a queen excluder, and depending on the nectar “flow” go the honey boxes.

On top of everything is a cover. As with many things in beekeeping there are several types, a so-called a “migratory” cover that allows boxes to be stacked next to each other, as on a truck and the “telescoping” cover that goes over an inner cover, then then telescopes down on the hive.

I said it was complex!

If you stray from the standard deep sizing, you may find availability of appropriately sized nucleus colonies impossible to find.

For those who intend going down the "natural" beekeeping route there are a few hives made commercially, but they can all be made at home, which is what many do. You may also have a hard time finding anyone to help you who has experience with these types of hives.

Q: **How much spare equipment should I have?**

A: It always makes sense to have some spare equipment, either for additions, replacements or emergencies. If you have a ready source locally, then don’t bother too much about it. In the early stages it makes sense to have a bottom board, brood box and at least enough frames to fill it. Foundation is worth stocking, but make sure you keep it so it doesn’t easily deteriorate.

Q: **What type of bees shall I get?**

A: Another complex question! All **honey bees** are not the same and this is a major problem in beekeeping, as many beekeepers and sadly tutors don’t understand that. There are a number of subspecies, but it is generally accepted there are none left in the world that are absolutely pure. In Maine, the two races of bees often available include the Italian and the Carniolian.

You can buy other races and hybrids – some may require different management styles, but these two races (along with the mutts) are the bees you’ll find most often kept in Maine.

In general the prolific are more suitable to the warmer climates where the weather is fairly reliable. Colonies are large with a large foraging force that are capable of storing a lot of honey. In these areas winters are usually quite short and the queens don’t go off lay, they just reduce to suit the conditions. Bees of this type include the **Italians** (*Apis mellifera ligustica*) that in various forms are probably the most used worldwide, because much of the commercial beekeeping is done in the hotter climates that suit these bees.

The **Carniolian** (*Apis mellifera carnica*) and mutt queens usually lay eggs in response to the conditions and in cold winters stop laying altogether. They are usually more frugal and look after their food much better. It has been said that workers in non-prolific colonies live longer than those in prolific, especially Italians. This means the cost to the colony in development of the brood to emergence is spread over a longer
period, giving the colony a significant saving.

There are some "hybrids" available and I would steer clear of them. If from a good source they can be excellent due to hybrid vigor, but the next generation can be very bad tempered with a great reduction in performance.

So, what do you do? Quite frankly I wouldn’t acquire anything other than local. If your local club is good, they should be able to steer you in the right direction. Speak to several members and find out who are the ones who have good bees. Make sure they have been keeping bees a long time and have raised their own queens, or buy local, not imported ones.

If buying a package of bees sounds good to you, then consider “requening” or giving the bees a new queen that was raised locally to you by the end of July.

**Q: How do I obtain bees?**

A: This is quite easy. Your local club may have a group order or there may be someone local to you selling bees. The MSBA has a listing of [bee vendors](#) on their website.

Most often available are three pound packages and nucleus colonies (more commonly called ‘nucs’)

Packages are usually made up in the Southern US and trucked to Maine. They are often available before nucleus colonies.

Nucleus colonies are bees on comb and are essentially starter colonies. Good ones will include brood in all stages, a queen, food, and room for them to grow! There is a risk of buying bees and comb infected with one of the contagious brood diseases. That’s where knowing your bee supplier’s reputation is important!

In my view you should buy local wherever you are. If you have a good club they should have a way of providing beginners with bees.

I have seen many unfortunate incidents involving beginners buying bees and this is why I advise caution. It is so easy to see bees as a simple commodity like a wheelbarrow, but they aren’t. If you buy bees that are infected with foul brood, there will be a standstill notice placed on you and they are likely to be destroyed by fire - not a good experience for a beginner. Not all bees are diseased, but it would be safer to have them checked before purchase and removal. Although some commercially sourced bees are good, others may not be. Some are made up from a number of colonies and given an imported queen. You should be aware in the US a [Federal law](#) restricts importation of bees and queens. That is for a reason. Don’t forget that a seller may have a reason for holding a different view.

In my view there is nothing wrong with starting with a swarm, although it is frowned upon by some. You will learn a lot and providing you hive it in a sensible way there should be few problems.

**Q: Can I keep my bees on my back yard?**

A: You will have to find out. The answer is most likely yes; your back yard needs to be near food and water resources for the bees. (Bees will forage up to about three miles from their hive.)

**Q: I do not want more than one colony of bees, is that ok?**

A: If you only have one hive and you have a problem with it, or it dies, you will need help or more bees from elsewhere. I always recommend a second hive fairly soon after the first, so you don’t have to rely
on others. One important issue that is missed by most is that with two colonies you can compare so you can spot their strengths and weaknesses, which will help you improve your bees. You will learn more and that is never a bad thing. It doesn’t take twice as long to look after two hives as it does one.

Q: Can I keep bees in my garden?

A: Yes, there is no local legislation to stop you, though this may not be the case in other countries. You should make sure there is room to keep at least 3 colonies, as during the summer months there may be times when you will temporarily increase your colony numbers for management purposes.

Q: How many hives can I keep in one place?

A: This depends on many things, but all areas will usually support a small number of colonies. Unless there are lots of kept Honey bees around you and/or limited forage opportunities for the bees to collect food and water, you ought to be able to keep a minimum of two colonies.

Q: Are there laws about keeping bees I need to be aware of?

A: In Maine, yes. A few you ought to know about include that bees be kept in modern hives with removable frames, that you need to register your Apiary each year by June 15th, and that American Foul Brood is a disease you must report to the State Apiarist.

Q: Are there laws about selling honey?

A: In Maine, yes, and which laws are applicable to you, depend upon where you are located. Honey removed from the comb is considered a processed food.

Q: Do I really need to worry about my bees catching American Foul Brood disease?

A: Worry, No, Be vigilant and aware, Yes. You should also know the some late summer honeys smell, something new beekeepers sometimes mistake as a sign of AFB.

Q: Do I need to belong to a local club?

A: In Maine you do not need to, though I always advise it. If you haven’t already joined one, then visit those in your area, see what they are like and join the one that suits you best. The benefits include help, advice and possibly insurance. Consider joining the MSBA and EAS too.

Q: Should I be insured?

A: Insured for what? Though in these days of litigation and no win - no fee solicitors – it may make sense to transfer some of your liability to insurance. The MSBA published a Best Management Practices a few years ago – your best protection may be in reading and following those.

Q: I want to be a natural beekeeper. Are there any problems?

A: There are problems with all kinds of beekeeping, but you should remember that no form of keeping bees is natural. This is a myth. (Keeping bees in a box is hardly natural.) You will be given a lot of advice from all sorts of people, which will be confusing to a beginner. There are many ways of keeping bees, some work well, some don’t. I think it advisable to keep bees in a conventional way before investigating other methods.
Q: Where do I get help from if I need it in a hurry?

A: It depends what help you need. If you think your bees may have a contagious bee disease, then contact the state apiarist. Identification of diseases should be taught by your club as part of their new beekeeper training. If you need other help in your early stages, then contact your local club. You may find answers to some of your questions on this website. Routine manipulation and inspection. Some are happy with responses in one of the many Facebook groups or on one of the beekeeping bulletin boards.

Q: Do I need to keep written records?

A: In Maine there is NO legal requirement for keeping records, but never-the-less you probably ought to. Colony records are useful, so you know what has happened in the colony and to help you prepare for your next inspection. In my opinion the vast majority of record sheets are very complicated and in many cases the information recorded is unnecessary.

Q: What should I record?

A: It depends what you want. There are several areas to consider and these could include:

- The state of the colony - this to include the food situation, details about the queen, disease, etc.
- Assessment of colony characteristics e.g. temper, quietness on the comb, etc.

It is common for enthusiastic beginners to try to record far more than they need. This often results in confusion and the abandoning of recording. In my view it is better to start with simple things and make additions when you want them. It is so easy to design your own record sheet on a computer, where you can add or delete things to suit you.

Q: How do I unite two or more colonies?

A: There are some precautions you will need to take, so learn about them. In most cases the "newspaper" method is the most suitable.

Q: Do I need to clip and mark a queen and how do I do it?

A: No, you don’t need to do it but there are benefits. Marking will help you find the queen, although there is a view that if you don’t, you will be looking for a queen, not a colored spot. I think this is reasonable and would leave it up to the individual, as in an amateur situation it is important to learn to look for a queen. Personally I have never bothered with international color marking. This is done supposedly to tell the age of a queen, but in reality very few do. I find yellow much easier to see than other colors, so always use that. Experienced beekeepers who know how to find queens usually mark them. Instead of marking, there is an alternative of using numbered discs.

There is a view that clipping the queen’s wing is "mutilation", but I suspect it has more to do with beekeepers being frightened of damaging her. In my opinion clipping has become more important as it delays the loss of a swarm for several days. The swarm comes out, but the queen can’t fly. She goes back into the hive, under the floor or crawls along the ground. The bees either go back into the hive or cluster with the queen. This gives the beekeeper more time to deal with the situation that should prevent non-beekeepers being inconvenienced by a swarm they don’t want. See a video about clipping and marking [here](#).

Q: How do I find the queen?
Finding queens is easy! In my experience, most beekeepers who can’t find queens have introduced a mental block of "I can’t find queens!" so of course they won’t. You need to be positive with an attitude of "I will find the queen!" You are nearly there then, but you need to know what you are looking for.

I think it’s difficult to tell people how to do it and it’s much better to develop your own technique. Fertile queens will move away from the light if they can, so when you take a frame out of the brood box, it immediately exposes one side of the next frame to the light. This I term the "light" side and the "dark" side is the unexposed side. If the queen was on the light side, she will probably have moved to the dark side by the time you take it out, so that halves your work.

I look at the dark side first, round the outside first starting with the bottom, then scan the surface of the comb. I find queens are easy to spot, but some beekeepers don’t see them, even if you hold a frame in front of them with the queen on. Eventually they might say "is that her there!" suggesting they don’t know what to look for in the first place.

If a colony of bees are "runners", the queens always are. Calmness on the comb is a trait that can be bred for, so that makes finding queens easier.

Q: How do I light my smoker?
A: This is one simple task we all have to do, but so many have a problem with. Have a look here.

Q: How and when do I feed my bees?
A: Bees are generally fed for two reasons, firstly so they have enough food to survive the winter and secondly to avoid starvation. There are a number of ways bees can be fed – as for which method is best for you, check with your local club.

Q: How do I make up syrup to feed my bees?
A: Mix sugar and water. Spring feed is 1 part (by weight or volume) sugar and 1 part water. Fall feed is 2 parts sugar, 1 part water. The bees don’t object if your ratios are not exact.

Q: Can I feed honey back to my bees?
A: Careful! Honey can be infected with disease including reportable diseases collectively called Foul Brood. The general rule of thumb is if the honey came from your own undiseased hives it is ok to feed. Never feed purchased honey.

Q: Do I need to feed pollen?
A: Pollen is essentially food for baby bees. In most parts of Maine there is enough natural pollen available that you do not need to feed pollen substitute.

Q: Why should I replace combs and how should I do it?
A: The thinking behind changing comb is to remove some of the causative organisms of bee diseases. This is for brood comb only and the normal age is reckoned to be around 3 years. I have heard it said that if you can’t see light through a comb it is too old. The normal method of changing combs is called a "Bailey Comb Change". Details can be found here and here.

Q: How much honey can I expect to get?
A: It will depend on a lot of things including the part of the state you live in, the forage available, if you have a single type of plant blooming nearby, the strength of the colony, if the colony has swarmed, your management, etc, etc. In fact most amateur beekeepers with several colonies often have vastly differing amounts of honey on each hive. In most years you should expect some crop and although 0-100lb or more is possible, you should expect an average of perhaps 30-50lb p/a. If you work your bees for comb honey they will have to build the comb which will reduce your crop. Don’t forget when thinking how much honey you will get to subtract the amount of feeding you will have to do, as some types of bees need a lot more food than others.

Many times a first year colony will not make honey beyond what they need for survival.

**Q: When should I take the honey from the bees?**

A: In Maine there are usually two flows – a spring/early summer one and a late summer one. Some harvest once a year in the fall; others harvest after each flow. Some people even harvest in the springtime after the bees use what they needed to survive the winter. Most new beekeepers are eager to taste the honey from their hive – harvesting post flow is very typical.

**Q: How do I get my honey from the bees?**

A: You will need to remove the bees from the combs and there are several ways of doing this. fume boards are probably the easiest, but smoking and shaking is an alternative for a small number of colonies or frames. Some beekeepers like bee escapes, though these may take several days to clear the supers.

**Q: Do I 'need' an extractor?**

A: If you work for extracted honey you will need an extractor of some sort. Many clubs lend or rent extractors and this is probably the best for a beginner. See what is available locally.

**Q: How do I uncap frames and use an extractor?**

A: This is quite difficult to describe here and in any case is probably better learnt at your local club where you should see it being demonstrated, ask questions and do it under supervision.

This FAQ was adapted to Maine by Maine Bee Wellness from a FAQ first developed and published on Dave Cushman’s Website. Dave (now deceased) was an extremely knowledgeable if opinionated beekeeper in the UK. His website continues to be maintained and is a wonderful resource.

Dave Cushman did not claim copyright for most material posted on his website. Maine Bee Wellness is not claiming it for this document.