

# Advice Note - Advice for Obtaining Honey Bees

## Background

As with any livestock there are good, average and bad strains of all races of honey bee and it is important for beekeepers, especially those new to the craft, to source bees that are suitable, being docile, productive, disease free and not inclined to swarm. You can obtain bees as a full colony, nucleus, package or swarm.

Full colonies are usually only available when a beekeeper is selling up or downsizing and are the most expensive way of buying bees, though you may save money on any beehives bought.

Bee suppliers usually offer nuclei which comprise of five combs, bees, brood, laying queen and stores. These generally come in a returnable or supplied travelling box and will need to be transferred to a clean, sterilized hive. When obtained early in the season these can quickly be built up into a full colony and may give a small honey crop.

Package bees, though unusual in the UK, provide an alternative to purchasing colonies or nuclei of bees. A package of bees is about 1.5-2 kg of worker bees, a queen and sugar or candy as food in a shipping container. As there are no frames or combs supplied they will need immediate housing in the same way as a swarm, i.e. into a clean hive containing new foundation or clean, sterilized drawn comb.

Swarms are available to collect but unless you have some beekeeping experience and the ability to collect them they should be avoided.

## When buying bees:

- Ascertain that the stocks offered are suitable for your needs. Try to avoid sourcing bees from outside your area as it could accelerate the spread of pests and diseases. Many beekeepers consider that local strains generally suit the natural flora of that locality.
- Use a reputable supplier. References may help you choose.
- Check with the supplier where the queen has come from. It is not always clear what strain of honey bee you are obtaining and whether the queen has been bred by the supplier, bought in or imported.
- If you import bees then make sure that you do this carefully. Follow the import rules if they come from outside the country through the proper channels of health certification. Guidance is available on Fera's National Bee Unit's (NBU) BeeBase website [www.nationalbeeunit.com](http://www.nationalbeeunit.com)
- If possible examine the bees before purchase to ensure they meet the required standard and are disease free. If you are not competent to do this then ask a beekeeper who is to check for you. If the vendor is not prepared to show you or allow examination consider why.
- If frames are marked with the point of origin it will help traceability.
- Maintain a record of your purchase. A suggested form for this purpose is on the reverse of this factsheet.
- By Summer 2011 beekeepers registered on BeeBase will be able to record a purchase, sale, gift or movement of bees within their BeeBase records.
- If you would like to register on BeeBase go to [www.nationalbeeunit.com](http://www.nationalbeeunit.com) or call 01904 462510.



## As a guide a good nucleus will:

- Have a good quality, young laying queen. She may be marked and/or clipped.
- Have all stages of bee brood present.
- Be free of signs of disease.
- Have at least three frames with brood.
- Have four frames or more fully covered with honey bees.
- Have the equivalent of at least one full comb of honey and half a frame of pollen as stores.
- All combs should be in a good and clean condition, preferably being less than one season old.



## If collecting swarms:

- Swarms of unknown origin should be hived in a separate or isolation apiary to enable disease and quality checks to be completed before introduction to established apiaries.
- Hived swarms should be assessed after six weeks and any colonies showing signs of serious disease\* should be destroyed, any showing undesirable traits, e.g. defensive behaviour, swarminess, chalk brood, etc., can be re-queened from a different stock. When satisfied that they are ok they can be moved to another apiary.

\*In the case of a statutorily notifiable disease or pest i.e. American Foul Brood, European Foul Brood, Tropilaelaps mites or Small hive beetle being suspected in a nucleus, package, swarm or colony of bees Fera's NBU or your local Bee Inspector must be informed immediately.

## Purchase, sales, gifts and movement of bees

Whenever honey bees are moved from one locality to another, there is always a risk that disease might be inadvertently spread. Despite the best efforts of those supplying bees, disease may not be apparent until after the bees have been distributed, perhaps over all regions of the country.

It is important to keep records of bee movements because in the event of a disease or pest outbreak it will then be possible to trace and alert the suppliers and recipients of other honey bees that may be at risk. You can capture information about bee movements either on a form similar to the one below or, if you are registered on BeeBase, through your BeeBase record (from Summer 2011).

The supplier and recipient should complete the appropriate form, retaining their part for at least two years.

Supplier's Copy	Date:	Origin of Queen: Description of stock:	Colony:	Nucleus:	Swarm:
	General comments:				
	Location <b>before</b> move:		Location <b>after</b> move:		
	Name and address of <b>Supplier</b> :		Name and address of <b>Recipient</b> :		

Recipient's Copy	Date:	Origin of Queen: Description of stock:	Colony:	Nucleus:	Swarm:
	General comments:				
	Location <b>before</b> move:		Location <b>after</b> move:		
	Name and address of <b>Supplier</b> :		Name and address of <b>Recipient</b> :		

This leaflet was produced as part of the Healthy Bees Plan. The Healthy Bees Plan aims to address the challenges facing beekeepers in sustaining the health of honey bees and beekeeping in England and Wales. It has been jointly developed by Governments, beekeepers, their associations and other stakeholders.

For more information on the Healthy Bees Plan visit:

<http://www.fera.defra.gov.uk/healthybeesplan>



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