



Obtaining bees

Advisory Leaflet No: 5

There are only four ways of acquiring bees, each with advantages and disadvantages.

A colony



A colony (with or without a hive) should have:

- a laying queen bee (preferably marked)
- at least six frames of brood
- sufficient worker bees to cover the brood frames
- at least two frames of stores (honey and pollen)
- at least one super not less than half full
- most of the colony's foraging bees.

The advantages of buying a colony are:

- the bees are established and
- come from a known source
- can be acquired at any time of year.

The disadvantages of buying a colony are:

- if not purchased with the hive, it will need to be re-hived, on site, several days before moving
- some types of hive, such as WBCs and Warrés are difficult to move
- there will be a lot of bees for a beginner to handle
- there will be a varroa load
- a high cost.

A nucleus



A nucleus is a newly created colony comprising five or six frames and:

- a laying queen bee (preferably marked)
- at least two frames of brood
- sufficient worker bees to cover the brood frames
- at least two frames of stores (honey and pollen)
- most of the nucleus's foraging bees

They are usually sold in a reusable cardboard travelling box.

The advantages of a nucleus are:

- an established mini-colony
- easy to manage
- comes from a known source.

The disadvantages of a nucleus are:

- they are not usually available until later in the season, usually around June or July
- it will need to be transferred into an external nucleus box or a hive
- it may need feeding to develop a critical mass for winter.

IMPORTANT

When buying either a colony or a nucleus, it is very important to ensure that the bees are locked in very late in the evening prior to collection. This is to ensure that as many of the hive's foraging bees are inside.

A package



A package comes in a disposable, wooden box and should contain:

- at least 1.5kg (3lbs) of bees
- a marked, mated, queen in a cage
- a feeder with food.

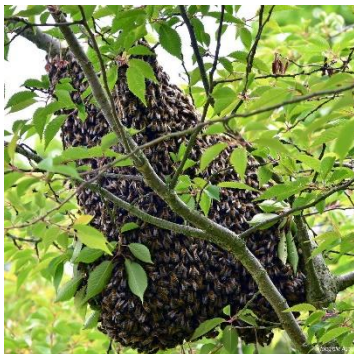
The advantages of a package are:

- easiest way to introduce bees into a non-standard frame hive such as a top-bar hive
- possibility of choice of queen
- usually available early in the season.

The disadvantages of a package are:

- they mostly contain bees from abroad which may not be well suited to your locality
- the package will need hiving straight away
- there is a risk that the bees may not accept the queen and abscond.

A swarm



A swarm occurs when an established colony decides to reproduce. The existing queen and around half the colony's bees leave the hive and seek a new home. One step in this process is to settle and cluster anywhere from a few hours to a few days. This is when they are most usually collected.

The advantages of a swarm are that they:

- are usually free to the collector
- usually occur between April and June
- are an easy way to introduce bees into a non-standard frame hive such as a Warré or top-bar hive
- are relatively parasite free.

The disadvantages of a swarm are:

- there may be insufficient bees to establish a viable colony
- the source and temperament of the swarm may be unknown
- they will need hiving straight away.
- they may abscond
- they will need feeding in order to build to a critical mass for winter.
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IMPORTANT

Wherever possible you should only obtain bees from a reputable local breeder. This will help to reduce the possibility of bringing pests and diseases into the country from abroad and ensure that you get bees which are well suited to your local area.