

Imported Bees

by Jason Leaner, NBU

The BBKA policy is to discourage the importation of bees into the UK, but bees can legally be imported from European Union States and some Third Countries. In this article, the National Bee Unit discusses the rules and regulations about the import of package bees as well as the process of harvesting bees and what happens en route to their destination.

A consignment of package bees is one of the means of shipping bees both within countries and further afield. This is a well developed industry in many parts of the world, including Europe, the USA and Australasia. The vast majority of imports into the UK are honey bee queens, but beekeepers also import nuclei and, more rarely, full-size colonies.

Importation of package bees is not nearly as common in the UK as it is in the USA, but the practice does exist on a small scale. If you wish to import a package of bees into the UK, then it must be accompanied with a Health Certificate which must show that the area of origin has been free of American foul brood for at least the previous thirty days and is free from Small Hive Beetle and *Tropilaelaps spp.*

Receiving a delivery of packaged bees Preparing to install honey packages

Each package is supplied by the pound (lb) and typically transported in a box with wired mesh on opposite sides. The conventional weight is around two to three pounds of adult bees, often mixed from different colonies, accompanied by a caged queen, although you can purchase them without, and a container holding about one litre of sugar syrup to sustain the package while it travels.

Preparing the package

There are several techniques commercial package producers use to collect the honey bees to put into the package and we have illustrated a few of these below. Close to the day of shipping, a work crew will go out into the apiary and begin shaking bees into a funnel structure to fill the containers they will be transported in. In the first method, the initial procedure is to locate the queen and safely place her, along with the frame she is on, back into the brood chamber. Usually, one beekeeper will do this, while placing the remaining frames with bees outside the entrance of the colony. From here, a separate team of beekeepers will shake the frames left outside the colony into a funnel where they will roll down into the package container located underneath. The frames are then placed back into the brood chamber.

Queens are often reared separately for packaged bees

The second method for packaging bees for export is similar to the first, where bees are shaken from the frames and into a funnel. The difference is that the bees are shaken directly from the hive into a funnel equipped with a queen excluder leading into the package box. As the bees are shaken in, they are smoked downward into the container and the colony's queen is left behind in the funnel. She is then placed back into the hive.

The third method of packaging bees involves placing a queen excluder over the brood nest. Above this is placed a covered super. The queen excluder will keep the queen and drones in the brood nest. The worker bees, however, are able to crawl up into the super when they are either smoked or drummed up. For those who are unfamiliar with drumming, this is a process of tapping the brood

box walls at either side in a fast and rhythmic manner; this causes the bees to move up from the brood nest and into the super. From here the bees are shaken into the funnel and weighed into packages.

Post-import controls

The only country outside the EU from where packages can be imported into the UK is New Zealand (NZ). They are inspected prior to export and, if found to be free of exotic pests and American foul brood, a health certificate is provided by the NZ Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The certificate travels with the consignment when they are picked up for shipment and taken to the airport. From here, they are shipped to the UK by air and pass through one of three Border Inspection Points (BIP): Gatwick, Heathrow or Manchester Airport. At this stage a paperwork check is carried out by Defra officials to ensure that the packages carry the relevant health certificate and if all is in order, they are sent to the importer.



Receiving package bees. All photos are courtesy of The Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera), Crown Copyright; images supplied by the National Bee Unit at Fera.

Once you know the date of arrival, it is important to remember that at least one working day's notice must be given in advance to the divisional veterinary manager of the BIP in the UK and the National Bee Unit (NBU). Soon after the packages of bees reach their destinations in England and Wales, whether imported from Europe or Third Country, a NBU Bee Inspector will come out to check them.

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Finally, it is important to remember that when hiving your package, this is done on fresh foundation. Instructions are often provided by the producers of the packages. The following evening, feed the developing 'colony' in much the same way as you would if a shook swarm had been carried out. Bees will need this extra nutrition to draw out the foundation and to feed the queen and eggs/larvae so that they develop into healthy brood and the colony rapidly expands into a productive unit. Additionally, consider the amount of pollen available and, if there is little to forage on, a pollen substitute may be required.



Installing a package of bees. After removing the caged queen (top), shake most of the bees onto the centred three frames (left) and then carefully add the remaining frames.

for Importers, which is also available on BeeBase. These guidelines provide the full information on what you need to do to comply with the legislation and health certification requirements if you wish to import or export bees. Third Countries are countries outside the EU that you are legally allowed to import from; for caged queens these are New Zealand, Australia and Argentina, and for packaged bees, only New Zealand. ✿

Import guidelines

If you want to import packages of honey bees or queens there are certain procedures that you must satisfy in terms of health certification. In addition you must notify the NBU and the local Animal Health Office responsible for the area where you live, giving at least one working day's notice before the bees arrive. You can notify the NBU using the Importer Notification form available on BeeBase at: <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/index.cfm?pagelD=126>. For beekeepers interested in importing bees into the UK from another Member State of the European Union (EU) or from Third Countries please consult the detailed *Guidance Notes*

Recommended reading

For more information on the production of package bees, and hiving and managing them, here are a few suggested references.

- ❑ Matheson A. Beekeeping: leading agricultural change in New Zealand, part 1. *Bee World* 1991; 72(2): 60–73.
- ❑ Berry R. The Arataki tube package: a major breakthrough in air-freighting bees. *New Zealand Beekeeper* 1987; 195: 8–10.
- ❑ Laidlaw HH Jr. Production of queens and package bees In: Graham, JM (ed) *The hive and the honey bee*, Dadant & Sons, pp 1033–42, 1992.
- ❑ Ambrose JT. Management for honey production In: Graham, JM (ed) *The hive and the honey bee*, Dadant & Sons, pp 604–10, 1992.
- ❑ Van Eaton C. Commercial queen production in New Zealand. *American Bee Journal* 1987; 127(11): 773–4, 785.
- ❑ Lloyd Harris J. Development of honey bee colonies initiated from package bees on the northern Great Plains of North America. *Journal of Apicultural Research* 2008; 47(2): 141–150.
- ❑ Jay SC. Studies on hiving package bees v. effects on loss of bees of queenlessness, size of package, shaking packages during hiving and storing conditions. *Journal of Apicultural Research* 1983; 22(2): 111–4.

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