

# Buying and Selling Bees

## Background: types of purchase

There are good, average and poor strains of all races of honey bee, as with any livestock, and it is important for beekeepers, especially those new to the craft, to source bees that are suitable; these being docile, productive and not inclined to swarm. It is also essential that you buy bees that are free of disease. Although you can obtain bees as a full colony, package or swarm, one of the most common ways to buy them is as a nucleus colony. Bee suppliers usually offer nuclei, which are comprised of five combs, bees, brood, a laying queen and stores. Full colonies are generally 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. Nucleus colonies come in a returnable or supplied travelling box and will need to be transferred to a clean, sterilised hive. When obtained early in the season these can be built up quickly 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/nucleus box containing new foundation or clean, sterilised drawn comb. Swarms are available to collect, but unless you have some beekeeping experience and the ability to collect them they should be avoided. This article highlights the steps you should follow to ensure that only healthy bees are bought and sold, with a particular emphasis on nucleus colonies.



NBU staff making up five frame nucleus colonies. All photos courtesy of The Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera), Crown Copyright; images supplied by the National Bee Unit at Fera.

## The impact of trading with diseased nucleus colonies

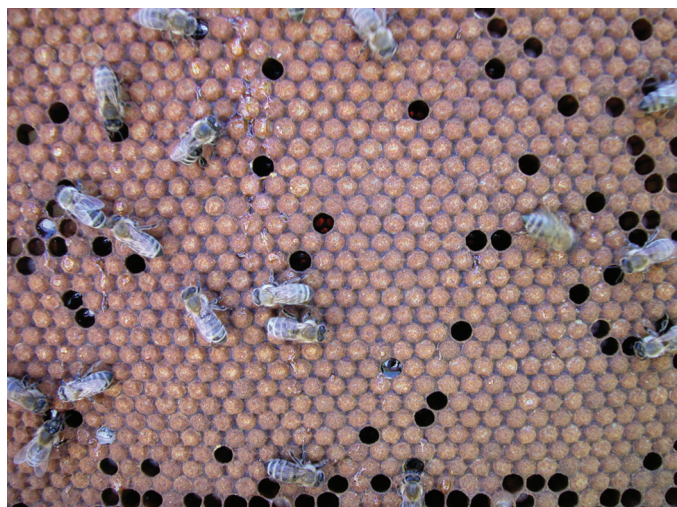
During the 2012 inspection season NBU Inspectors diagnosed Statutory Bee Disease (i.e. foul broods) in a total of 45 stocks of bees which had been sold on from either commercial or private vendors. This affected seven of the NBU's eight beekeeping regions. Some of the stock was found many miles from its place of origin. In one example the bees in question had been transported more than two hundred miles from their original supplier. The knock-on effect of this was the tracing of beekeepers and their sites around each of these 45 locations to check for further spread of disease. In total this amounted to 445 apiary inspections. Although a significant inspection effort, it was in fact slightly lower than

comparable figures for 2011, when a similar number of diseased stocks generated more than six hundred additional tracings and inspections.

Due to the Inspectorate's finite resources in many areas, it is not possible to visit all of these sites as quickly as we would wish, sometimes not even in the same season. This means that any disease spread with the original stock may have time to establish in an area before it can be dealt with. This is particularly likely to happen if disease is not identified by the beekeeper and reported. The major concern here is where diseased stocks die out during the winter and are not discovered and removed or sealed, leaving them open to robbing-out by inquisitive bees in the early spring (bees are out investigating their surroundings even on fine days in February) with the resultant spread of the disease.



Severe EFB infection. The signs include patchy, uneven brood pattern, discoloured and misshapen larvae and holes chewed in the wax cappings (note the contrast with healthy brood, illustrated below).



Healthy capped brood.

## 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. Ask them if they are supplying bees

which meet the National Bee Unit's (NBU's) or BBKA's *Guidance for the Sale of Honey Bee Nuclei* (Healthy Bees Plan leaflet, March 2012) <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/downloadNews.cfm?id=119> (If you would like a hard copy of *Guidance for the Sale of Honey Bee Nuclei*, please contact Marie Holmes, email: [marie.holmes@fera.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:marie.holmes@fera.gsi.gov.uk)).

- ❑ Code of Practice for Nucleus Colonies. Ask the beekeeper from whom you purchase if they are registered on the NBU's BeeBase database and whether they have had their bees inspected by a Bee Inspector recently.
- ❑ 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.
- ❑ In addition to talking to the supplier, you can also ask your local Bee Inspector for the 'disease status' of the area from where you intend to purchase. The NBU will never discuss the details of individual beekeepers, but we can comment on the overall status of an area. It is then up to you to decide!
- ❑ If you import bees then make sure that you do this carefully. If they come from outside the country follow the import rules through the proper channels of health certification. Guidance is available on the 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 more experienced beekeeper to check for you; what about your local beekeeping association mentor?
- ❑ If the vendor is not prepared to show you the bees or allow examination consider why; remember, you can go and buy your bees from somewhere else.
- ❑ 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 provided opposite.
- ❑ It is very important that beekeepers who register for the first time on BeeBase complete the section which asks where their bees were sourced from. This then flags up to the local Bee Inspector if bees have been moved from a known high risk area to a low risk area from a disease perspective and this will usually trigger a visit.
- ❑ 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.
- ❑ Have all combs in a good and clean condition, preferably being less than one season old.

If you are new to beekeeping, ask a more experienced beekeeper to confirm the above conditions with you.

### 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 spread inadvertently. 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 on a form similar to the one below. 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> :		

*Suggested form for recording bee purchases. The appropriate sections should be completed by the supplier and the recipient, and each should retain their part for at least two years after the sale.*

### Acknowledgements

This article is based on a best practice leaflet, 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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