



Taking up Beekeeping - A Guide by Oxfordshire Beekeeping Association

So you are thinking of taking up beekeeping?

In this document we give advice for people considering taking up beekeeping, including some of the problems you may encounter.

Beekeeping is a great hobby in its own right with the satisfaction of tending your bees and the fascination of their lives and the inner workings of the colony.

But there are many other aspects of the Apiarist's (beekeeper's) world, which mean you can expand your other interests and hobbies. If you're a competent DIYer, you can save money by making your own equipment, and even full hives. As well as honey, you will also get a crop of wax, which can be made into candles, polish, cosmetics and other products. If you have a scientific bent, studying bee biology, microscopy and bee diseases will improve your understanding and beekeeping skills, while the history, folk-lore and art of bees and beekeeping are fascinating areas of study.

But there are some important considerations to be made before making the commitment to keep bees - and it IS a commitment and a responsibility. We cover the following topics:

- **Bee Welfare**
- **Health and Safety**
- **Financial cost**
- **Time and expertise required to keep bees**
- **OBKA's Beginners' Training Course**
- **Learning about Beekeeping**
- **Membership of a Beekeeping Association**

Bee Welfare

While bees have been domesticated for thousands of years, they are essentially wild creatures, unlike, say, cattle which are now very different from their wild ancestors. By keeping bees in a hive, they are also livestock under your care and, to a certain extent, your control. You will need to understand them, their lifecycle, their needs and their driving instincts. You will need to learn about 'best practice' beekeeping, including important aspects such as disease control and recognising pests, such as the Asian Hornet, which change over time.

You may even want to consider that the well-meaning introduction of honey bees can have a negative impact on other native pollinators in some areas, as they compete at times for limited resources. (By the way, honey bees are a native species of the UK.) You can support bees in other ways than by beekeeping!

There are many books about keeping bees, and lots of resources on the web, but we would strongly advise that before you start out you complete some kind of training course or at have an experienced beekeeper to advise you. It's one thing to open a book, but quite another open a hive of 50,000 bees. Understanding what you have read comes with practice, and without a good basic knowledge to work from, you will not be able to sift the great advice and resources offered online from the terrible advice, bad practice and information which may not even apply in this country.

These are links to reliable sources of information about beekeeping on the web:

[British Beekeepers Association](#)

[Beebase - Beekeeping information resource for Beekeepers](#)

[Dave Cushman's Beekeeping Pages](#)

Health and Safety

'Health and Safety' refers the human welfare aspect of beekeeping, which you MUST consider before keeping bees. If provoked, honey bees sting and are considered by many people to be a pest. For a minority of people, a bee sting may be dangerous. If you have had a severe reaction to an insect sting requiring urgent medical intervention (anaphylactic shock), we strongly recommend that beekeeping is not a suitable hobby for you. Take up watercolour painting or basket weaving instead.

You also need to consider the effect of your bees on other people, especially if you keep them in urban areas.

Where are you planning to keep your bees, away from home (an 'out' apiary) or in your garden? What are the likely problems? Neighbours, schools, animals, footpaths? Bees are usually calm and non-aggressive insects but the nearer you are to their nest, (the hive) the more likely you are to encountering a defensive bee with attitude. With a colony of up to 60,000 bees, accidents can happen: daisies in next-door's lawn and children's bare feet are not a good mix. You need to be attentive to not only the requirement of the bees but also of the people around you. The public in general are in favour of pollinators such as bees, but rapidly change their views when they encounter them close up.

You need to take care where hives are placed, especially if there are neighbouring gardens or footpaths close by.

You will need to take all possible care to ensure your bees do not swarm and cause a nuisance and danger to people and property: they could end up in somebody's roof space, shed or other places bees think will be good accommodation.

Financial Cost

There is no quick, cheap route to becoming a beekeeper. If you get a hive and bees and expect to make a profit from beekeeping, you may be in for a shock. Your outlay on hives, bees, kit, gadgets and so on will always outstrip any honey sales from a few hives.

In terms of equipment, there are many options and compromises to be made, each having a direct effect on the overall set-up cost. This makes it nearly impossible to say what your final expenditure will be. Even the lowest start-up costs will be in the order of hundreds of pounds in the first year. Some decisions affecting costs include:

- What kind of hive do you have in mind? DIY flat-pack, fully assembled, traditional wood or polystyrene? Even a Flow Hive? All come with a list of advantages and disadvantages you

need to know!! The cost of a hive can vary by a factor of at least three from the least to the most expensive. It is also advised to have some spare equipment in order to prevent or catch a stray swarm. Bees do have a tendency to multiply!

- What kind of bee suit and kit do you want? A quick look at the bee suppliers websites will give you an idea of just how much kit there is available: much of which you can perfectly well do without. It's a minefield, but the advice and support of a beekeeping community will help you to avoid expensive mistakes. The minimum you require is a full cover bee suit, some gloves, wellington boots, a smoker and a hive tool.
- How do you want to stock your hive? Bees are normally sold as a nucleus hive (a 'nuc') comprising five frames with queen, brood and stores. These typically cost around £230 from reputable suppliers and will be disease accredited under the DASH scheme. It's sometimes possible to find cheaper bees, but these will not necessarily be headed by a young queen and may not have been inspected for disease. Finally, you can collect a swarm, which comes at no cost.

Below are a several links to local beekeeping equipment suppliers. Many more can be found online.

[Beekeeping Equipment | EH Thorne \(Beehives\) Ltd](#)
[Home | National Bee Supplies](#)
[Simon the Beekeeper](#)

Time and expertise required to keep bees

Beekeeping takes time and care. It's much easier to manage honey bees if you understand how they behave and something of their biology.

Do you have time to spare?

Throughout winter bees require little attention, but as spring approaches colonies should be inspected once a week. This is to check that all is proceeding as expected, that there is no evidence of disease, and that the colony is expanding. You will also be looking for signs that the colony is preparing to swarm. Swarming is the natural process of colony reproduction and involves just over half the bees leaving the hive with the queen, gathering somewhere nearby in a cluster until they move on to their new home. If you lose a swarm, you also lose most of your surplus honey crop for that year as well.

The bees will not wait for you!! When nature's calling, if you are a day late for an inspection, the bees will have left. Weekly inspections are necessary from March/April (weather dependent) to July/August.

Honey can be taken at any time from early summer onwards, providing you leave enough for the bees. This requires extra time and effort, maybe half a day or more. Once into September, you need to spend time preparing the bees for winter, and cleaning equipment for the following year.

OBKA's Beginners' Training Course

We have produced this document to give you an insight into the different aspects of beekeeping, and help you make an informed decision about whether beekeeping is for you. Should you wish to proceed, the OBKA runs a taster session in the summer to show what is involved, and at the end of February, we run a two hour 'What is Beekeeping' evening where we explain what beekeeping

involves in greater depth. Our beginners' training course is run by experienced tutors during the main beekeeping season, starting with a classroom session in March followed by one practical session each month from April until August.

Learning about Beekeeping

We recommend that you buy an up-to-date book on beekeeping. Older books, often available second hand, don't cover recently introduced pests and diseases that cause serious damage to bees and they often provide out-of-date information on bees medicines and treatments, and selling honey. Our Beginners' Training Course uses the Haynes Bee Manual. It's not especially expensive and is readily available. It gives a clear simple explanation of what is involved managing a colony. There are several similar books available covering beekeeping for beginners, for example the BBKA Guide to Beekeeping (Dr Ivor Davis and Roger Cullum-Kenyon).

There are various beekeeping websites, some of which are helpful, others less so. Start with the British Beekeepers Association:

[British Beekeepers Association](#)

and the BeeBase website which is provided by the National Bee Unit in DEFRA (UK Government body responsible for maintaining a healthy bee population).

[Beebase - Beekeeping information resource for Beekeepers](#)

Membership of a Beekeeping Association

We recommend becoming a member of a local beekeeping association such as OBKA, which aims to improve knowledge of beekeeping both among its members and the public.

Membership is not especially expensive and it gives you full membership of the British Beekeepers Association (BBKA) and an insurance package covering bee disease, third party liability and product liability.

We provide several ways to help members develop their beekeeping skills and knowledge in addition to our training courses.

We run talks on beekeeping topics, mainly in the winter months, and occasionally arrange apiary visits during summer. We also have two apiary sessions each year where an experienced beekeeper gives a demonstration of handling bees. (Spring and autumn Apiary tidy-up sessions.)

We encourage beekeepers to improve their knowledge of beekeeping, and to attempt the BBKA examinations. Each year several people attempt the basic assessment and a few members attempt the BBKA module examinations.

We issue a monthly Newsletter and are happy to include contributions from members, including articles and adverts (with some restrictions).

We run a website which is our primary means of communicating with the general public. There is a members only area which to some extent duplicates the Newsletter. This includes an events calendar and a classified adverts section.

We also run a private Facebook page, which is linked from the OBKA website.

OBKA has a library of over 250 books which can be borrowed by members. Members can find a library catalogue through the following link:

<https://obka.org.uk/members-area/obka-library/>

Finally, we are sometimes able to put novices in touch with a mentor in their area. If you would like us to try to find a mentor, please send an enquiry to the secretary stating which area you live.