

How to Start Beekeeping for Free!



The author lifting a natural comb from one of his top bar hives

Beekeeping has suddenly become popular again, having been in decline for more than half a century.

Honeybees have been in the news for all the wrong reasons: collapsing colonies, pesticide poisoning and parasitic mites – and all this bad news seems to have triggered an almost primitive desire in people to want to help and nurture this vitally-important insect that, despite all our scientific advances we still do not fully understand, but know that we cannot live without.

Ever since I can remember, beekeepers have been regarded by the media as harmless, dodderly old men (mostly), who do arcane things with strange wooden boxes of bees, while dressed in sartorially suspect garb. However, this image is beginning to change, with more and more women and young people being attracted to the idea of learning this ancient craft and a new urgency in the air about preserving our honeybees for their important role as pollinators, as well as for their own sake.

When people first consider keeping bees, their most likely first port of call is their local Bee Keepers Association. Here they will almost always find a friendly welcome and a great deal of technical chat among the 'old hands', most of which

will sound like a foreign language at first. When the jargon is translated, it turns out that one will be required to part with a not inconsiderable sum of money in order to buy one's ticket into this arcane world: the glossy catalogues full of shiny equipment are beguiling, but the accompanying price lists can come as quite a shock.

Many are put off the idea at this point.

But it need not be so. It is perfectly possible to become a beekeeper – even quite a good beekeeper – without blowing a good chunk of one's hard-earned savings. In fact, as I shall show you, you can even do it virtually for free!

The next hurdle to confront the would-be keeper is the hefty weights that one is expected to lift and carry. Using conventional equipment, you need to be able to lift at least 50 pounds (about 25 kilos) dead weight from ground level – not something to try if you are lightly built and not used to box-shifting in that class.

Again, this does not have to be the case: I will show you how the least fit person can become a beekeeper. In fact, using my system, you could even work a hive from a wheelchair.

Another obstacle that may kill off the newbie's enthusiasm is that of storage space. Using conventional hives, you cannot fail to accumulate all kinds of 'extras' – odd-shaped boxes, frames, roofs, extractors – all kinds of stuff the 'old hands' forgot to mention at that first, exciting meeting – and you will need space to store it. We are talking garage space, folks. Once more I have good news: follow my system and you will not need any extra storage space, as everything can be stored inside the hives themselves.

So what does it really take to become a beekeeper?

The essentials are simple enough: some sort of hive, a hat and a veil, an old, white shirt and – to start with at least - some gloves – and the agreement of the people who share your living space. It doesn't matter whether you are a town or a country dweller, so long as there is an abundant and varied supply of flowering plants from early spring onwards. In fact, bees often do better in well-gardened, urban areas than in the 'green desert' of modern, industrial farm land.

Like many beekeeping novices, I began with a conventional, framed hive – the kind with sloped-sided outer boxes familiar from children's books. Soon, I acquired a couple more and began to realize that if I was to continue along this road, I would have to build myself a big shed in which to house all the spare woodwork and other paraphernalia that was rapidly accumulating – and I would have to find a way to pay for all the 'extras' I would soon be needing.

At this point I asked myself - does it really need to be this way? - and that innocent question led me on an exploratory mission of reading, study and experimentation that showed me conclusively that, no – it does not need to be that way: beekeeping does not need to be complicated, expensive or dependent on machine-made parts and equipment.

My search for an alternative approach led me to the top bar hive - one of the oldest and simplest types of beehive - that requires little skill and few tools to build. A good start on the road to sustainable simplicity, but is it a practical hive for modern beekeeping?

After some years of experimenting and testing various designs, I believe I now have a top bar hive design that is easy to build, practical and productive, while being comfortable and easy to use for both the bees and the beekeeper.

So what are top bar hives?

The principle is simple: a box with sticks across the top, to which bees attach their comb. Mine have central, side entrances, sloping sides and a pair of 'follower boards' to enclose the colony. There are many variations on this theme and all have the essential guiding principle of simplicity of construction and of management. There are no frames, no queen excluders, no ekes, no mouse guards, no supers, no foundation and there is no need for extractors, settling



Top bars hives are simple, and easy to build at home – even from recycled wood.

tanks, filters, de-capping knives... in fact no need for any other equipment or storage space, other than that provided within the hive itself. And if you have just spent an hour leafing through suppliers' catalogues, wondering how you can possibly afford to keep bees, that will come as some relief!

Building a top bar hive is no more difficult than putting up shelves and can be done using hand tools and recycled wood. Top bar beekeeping really is 'beekeeping for everyone' – including people with disabilities, bad backs, or a reluctance to lift boxes: there is no heavy lifting once your hives are in place, as honey is harvested one comb at a time. From the bees' point of view, top bar hives offer weatherproof shelter, the opportunity to build comb to their own design – without the constraints of man-made wax foundation – and minimal disturbance, thanks to a 'leave well alone' style of management.

So where do you get bees from?

You can buy them or catch them, or if you are lucky, they will adopt you! Catching or luring a swarm is by far the most fun – and much easier than you might think. Bees swarm in response to their instinct to reproduce – mostly in spring and early summer – and the sight of a swarm in flight is certainly impressive. However, contrary to popular belief, this is the time when they are least likely to sting you: their only concern at that moment is to find a new place to live. So if you offer them the right sort of accommodation at the right time –

such as a pleasant-smelling, cosy beehive – they are very likely to move in of their own accord. Many people become beekeepers by enticing a passing swarm using a few drops of citronella or lemon grass oil, or better still, rubbing the inside of the hive with pure beeswax.

Capturing a swarm is not difficult either – hold a basket or cardboard box under their football-sized cluster on a tree branch and give a good shake! It is not always as easy as that, but it is rarely as difficult as getting a cat out of a tree.

If you think you want to keep bees, I suggest you first get to know a local beekeeper who is willing to let you visit and handle their bees. Most beekeepers' associations have 'meet the bees' days during the spring, giving newcomers a chance to see inside a hive and test their responses to being surrounded by bees.

And stings? Yes, you will get stung from time to time, however careful you are. Local swelling, redness and itching is a normal reaction: faintness, breathing difficulties and collapse are true allergic symptoms and are potentially life-threatening. Most people who keep bees become less sensitive to stings over time, but sometimes it goes the other way and occasionally an experienced beekeeper may suddenly become allergic. So if you have any reason to suppose you may be sensitive to bee venom (only about one in 200 people are) be sure to carry Benadryl or an EpiPen (adrenaline injection) or ensure that whoever you are with is properly equipped to deal with an emergency.

Whether you approach it from the point of view of conservation, entomology, crop pollination or simply a love of honey, beekeeping is an engaging pursuit and a fascinating window on the natural world.

Bees are in trouble right now – from pesticides, industrial farming, pollution, parasitic mites and viruses – and we need all the 'natural' beekeepers we can get to build up their numbers and give them a chance to solve their own problems. So, if you want to keep bees, build yourself a hive before the swarm season, and you could be tasting your own honey by the end of the summer!

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In his book *The Barefoot Beekeeper*, Phil describes his top bar hive and its management and discusses the philosophy of natural beekeeping: working with the natural impulses and habits of the bees. You can find free plans to build a top bar hive and a busy support forum with plenty of free advice and information at Phil's site - <http://www.biobees.com>

You can buy *The Barefoot Beekeeper* from [Lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) or from any bookshop using ISBN 978-1-4092-7114-7