"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."
- J. Capgrave

A standard bit of knowledge in outdated beekeeping books is that beginners can get their first bees by capturing swarms. Back when the feral honey bee population was alive and well, before the invasion of tracheal and varroa mites in the mid-1980s, swarms were common. These days there are very few feral hives and a beekeeper cannot rely on finding swarms. That doesn't mean they don't exist, it just means that it often takes a lot of work to get the few that are out there.

What are swarms?

A swarm is a queen bee (either mated or virgin) along a mass of bees that have left their original home. When bees abscond (totally abandon a hive), the entire colony is in the swarm. Absconding is rare for our European honey bees. Far more common are reproductive swarms. These contain half or more of a colony's worker population, the remainder staying put in the original hive.

Contrary to popular wisdom, the queen does not initiate swarming, nor does she lead the swarm. She is a critical member (her pheromones define the focal point) but otherwise she is just along for the ride. If the swarm accidently leaves without her, they'll come back and try again.

Prime swarming season is during the height of the nectar flow. For us in Piedmont NC, that is in April and May, although depending on the weather it can begin a little earlier and end a little later. Bees can swarm at other times but it is risky for them to do so because they must have the resources and the time to draw wax comb, build a sustainable population and store plenty of food before winter sets in. That's the basis behind the old beekeeping proverb:

A swarm in May is worth a load of hay.
A swarm in June is worth a silver spoon.
A swarm in July isn't worth a fly.

A late-season swarm (after the end of the main nectar flow) requires a lot of beekeeper effort to ensure its survival. Typically it isn't worth the trouble.

A nice-sized colony in the wall of a house.

Swarms versus cut-outs

Swarms are literally "hanging around". They haven't moved in somewhere and set up housekeeping yet. Once they have found a home and are drawing out wax comb, they are officially established and are no longer swarms.

Beekeepers remove entire established colonies by cutting the comb from their enclosure, hence the term "cut-out." Often the enclosure is the cavity within a wall or floor of a house.

When electricity is available, a specially constructed bee vacuum makes collecting cut-outs much more efficient and enjoyable. The bees are vacuumed off of each comb as it becomes exposed in the removal process. They are gently sucked into a ventilated holding cage. The bees can then be installed onto new equipment in exactly the same manner as a purchased bee package.

A bee vacuum only works when the comb and bees are exposed, for example when the sheetrock has been cut away from a wall. It cannot "suck the bees out of a wall".

An advantage of cut-outs over swarms is that the "swarm in May" proverb isn't as strict with cut-outs. In theory, a strong, well-provisioned colony can be removed and re-housed in standard equipment just about any time of year, although chances for success are

greatest when there is plenty of time for them to get reestablished before winter.

What swarms are not

Many beekeepers seek swarms and cut-outs because they believe these are "survivor bees" and will perform better in our climate or have special protective traits against varroa mites. This notion is largely a myth, because most feral bees are first or second generation escapes from managed hives. They haven't lived as a self-sustaining population for any length of time and don't have genetics any different than a newly-purchased package. This is especially true in our area since we don't have geographic boundaries such as tall mountains, deserts or remote islands to isolate populations of bees and prevent cross-breeding with commercially-sourced colonies.

When someone says, "Those bees have lived in grandma's attic for 20 years," it is most likely that many different colonies have moved in, died and have been replaced by yet another colony that was attracted to the spot by the smell of the old abandoned comb. Grandma wouldn't have noticed the change-over in populations.

The sad truth is that rather than being super-bees, you can expect unmanaged feral hives to sicken and die from diseases related to varroa mites just as quickly as untreated hives that happen to be owned by someone. There isn't anything magical about being born in a tree versus a box.

How to find swarms

How does someone find swarms and cut-outs? We could cruise around the countryside with the car windows rolled down, listening for the tell-tale hum of a few thousand migrating bees. That may work, but not very well! It is easier to become involved with a local beekeepers association and ask to be added to its Swarm Patrol list. This is a list of members who are notified when someone from the public (aka a "normal person") contacts the association with a request for a swarm or

Above: Colony conveniently located underneath the chimney of a house.
Below: View from underneath. Note the pearly white comb. This colony had not been in this location for very long.

colony removal. The list may be divided into geographic region, availability (time of day/day of week), fees charged, type of removal, etc. In my experience, being available at the drop of a hat and being on friendly terms with the list manager help your chances of being contacted.

Another way to find swarms is to tell every one of your friends, relatives, neighbors, sales clerks, barbers, panhandlers and anyone else you come across that you are a beekeeper. Say that they can help "save the bees" by calling you if they see a swarm. Word-of-mouth is how I have found most of the swarms and cut-outs I have collected.

I know a beekeeper who has posted notices on Craig's List asking for swarms. Another has an arrangement where he gets referrals from a professional exterminator. Use your imagination.

Look before you leap

There are a few questions you should ask before you drop everything and rush to the other side of the Triangle to collect a swarm. If you don't, there is a good chance you will be disappointed.

Are they really honey bees?

"Normal people" don't usually know the difference between various types of flying, stinging insects. They are all "bees". I've had people offer me, free for the taking, "bees" that turned out to be yellow jackets and carpenter bees. I was even told I could keep all the honey from the carpenter bees for myself. I've learned to I ask, as politely as possible, how the person knows the critters are honey bees. They must describe them to my satisfaction. A cell-phone photo clears up any doubt, assuming the "normal person" is brave enough to take a close-up.

Where exactly are they?

Swarms seem to prefer the view from 30 feet atop a pine tree. I've been told, "You may be able to get them with a ladder." That would have been true if the ladder was dangling beneath a helicopter.

I once refused to be out-maneuvered by a large swarm that was halfway up a tall tree. After failing with ladders, ropes and bucket contrivances, I chopped the tree down. I watched as it fell, bucket in hand, ready to scoop up my hard-earned bees. Just before the tree hit the ground, the bees alit en mass in a perfectly choreographed motion and flew to the same height in a tree next to the one I had brought down.

Swarms that don't want to "get got" should be given a cheerful farewell.

Bees inside cinderblock walls deserve the same lack of interest. They can't be removed alive without destroying the wall or installing a special trap-out device. To me, the work required to do either of those isn't worth the value of the bees.

How long have they been there?

When honey bees swarm, they first congregate a short distance away from the hive. Once they are convinced that the queen is present and everyone is ready to go, they take off for greener pastures a half mile to a mile away. They'll regroup in a new spot while scouts search for a suitable cavity to set up permanent housekeeping.

I've seen the first aggregation last from 10 minutes to 24 hours, but I expect it to be no more than 30 minutes. The second aggregation can last a day or two but isn't likely to take longer than that. So if someone offers you a swarm, ask how long it has been there. "A few minutes" is a terrific response. "A few days" may mean that by the time you arrive, the bees will have left.

How large is the swarm?

A colony can swarm several times in succession. The primary swarm is likely the largest (half of the original colony) and should contain the mother queen. Secondary swarms are smaller since they are a portion of the remaining bees. They are issued sometime after the primary swarm and have virgin queens.

I once captured a primary swarm that weighed ten pounds. A third of that weight was the honey they stole as food for the journey before taking off, but that left more than six pounds of actual bees. That's more than what comes in two purchased bee packages. Not bad.

I've also seen secondary swarms that contained a couple of handfuls of bees. Those probably aren't worth collecting; it is unlikely that they'll build up to full colony strength before the end of the season. And it could be that the small swarm is a bunch of sad bees that got left behind when the main swarm took off for parts unknown. If so, there is no queen.

Who else knows about this?

There is no point in driving 30 minutes to collect a swarm only to be told, "The other guy just left with the bees." If a homeowner is hedging his bets by offering the swarm to more

than one person, he can play that game without me.

How to guarantee a sure thing

Swarm-chasing can sometimes be rewarding but it can also be frustrating. Is it worth it? For me, the easy ones are worth it and the hard ones are not. I don't feel bad at all about passing up on "free bees" that would be a major hassle to collect or aren't a sure thing. And there are years that no swarm prospects come my way at all, either easy or hard.

All in all, the best swarms for beginning beekeepers are the ones that come pre-packaged. The cost is guaranteed but so are the bees!

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Above: Bees from one of my hives in the initial aggregation stage of swarming.
Below: This was the "perfect swarm": shoulder high and close enough to an electrical outlet to gather up with my bee vacuum.