

*"When is the best time to plant a fruit tree?  
Twenty years ago. When is the next best time?  
Today."*

– Unknown

Somebody called me not long ago and asked, "What do I need to do to keep bees?" I gave an inaudible sigh and thought, "Oh boy... this is going to be a long conversation."

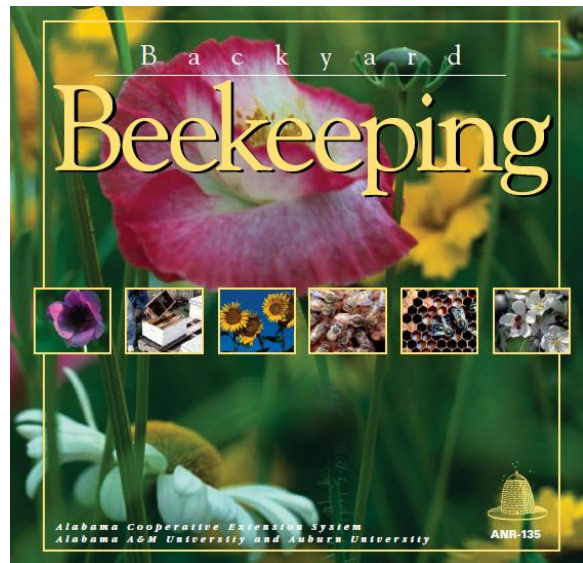
Perhaps I should have answered, "First, get a good job and makes lots of money, because this isn't going to be cheap!" Instead I gave my standard recommendation: start by attending a good bee school. (See January 2016's [Get thee to a bee school!](#)) As local beekeeper John Rintoul once said, "Beekeeping is more enjoyable for the beekeeper and the bees when the beekeeper knows what they are doing." Nobody can argue with that.

However that single bit of advice, all by itself, sounds a bit curt. If I were to ask a friend how to change the oil in my car and they said, "Go to Durham Tech and take a class in auto mechanics," I may feel a little un-helped. With that in mind, what is a helpful response to the question of how to get started as a beekeeper?

## Education

Certainly educating yourself should be the first step. Bee schools are a great start, but there are good introductory books out there that can help too. Keith Delaplane's [First Lessons in Beekeeping](#) is a really good eclectic guidebook to get a beekeeper through the first few months. To learn more, there is nothing better than the most recent version of Dadant's [The Hive and the Honey Bee](#). However that tome is not intended for beginners.

When choosing how-to books, make sure you pick ones that include up-to-date recommendations for effective Varroa mite control (i.e., explaining how to monitor and treat with legal, currently available miticides). Goal Number One is to learn how to keep your honey bees alive. Avoid trendy feel-good books by non-credentialed authors telling us how to be at one with our bees or advising us to



Dr. Jim Tew's informative and easy-to-read beginner book is available for free download.

neglect their deadly parasites. Those books can make interesting, even humorous, reading once you are properly educated, but they do a huge disservice to well-intentioned people who are building their knowledge from the ground up.

A wonderful beginner book that meets two of my personal Desirable Book criteria – it is short and it is available for free download – is Dr. Jim Tew's [Backyard Beekeeping](#). Not only is it remarkably complete for its size, it is specifically written for the South and Southeast, a rare thing in beekeeping literature.

Just as valuable as bee schools are local beekeeping clubs. (See September 2017's "[Local Beekeeper Associations: A Whole Lot of Bang for the Buck](#)".) A good bee club hosts the equivalent of a bee school presentation each and every month.

## Location (general)

Okay, once we've done our homework and have learned that "supers" go on top of "hive bodies" and everything is sandwiched between a "bottom board" and an "outer cover", what's next? Hmm... where are we going to put these bees? Location is an important decision. Most of us choose, either by preference or necessity, to keep our bees in our yards at home. But maybe you live in an apartment or have friends begging you to place hives on their property. Or

maybe you have a nice trailer and a yen for travel, so have greater options for where you place hives (how about Orlando in winter, Roxboro in spring and Asheville in the summer?)

Beekeeping success depends perhaps 5% on the beekeeper, 5% on the bees and 90% on the location. And small shifts in locale can make a big difference. I live in a mostly-forested area and depend on tulip poplar trees for the lion's share of my honey crop. I have a friend who lives 15 or so miles away whose neighbor grows buckwheat, so his honey crop is extremely different than mine in taste, quantity and timing.

Can't decide where to keep your bees? You don't have to – you can set up apiaries in several different places. Apiaries anywhere but at home are called "out-yards". Realize, however, that much more time and effort is required to manage out-yards and inspections won't be as frequent as for home yards. And there is nothing quite as frustrating as driving 30 minutes to an out-yard only to discover that you've left your smoker at home!

A North Carolina law passed in 2015 prevents municipalities from banning small-scale beekeeping ([Session Law 2015-246, Section 8](#)). However many people voluntarily sign away their inherent property rights when they join neighborhood Home Owners' Associations (HOAs). HOAs are notorious for having covenants against doing things that are good for mankind, such as putting up fences or keeping honey bees. Check your neighborhood covenants before investing in beekeeping. If you cannot place hives at your home, you can always keep them off-site as I mentioned above. Your local beekeeping association is often a great resource for finding locations to set hives.

### Location (precise)

Once you've got the general location picked out for your bees – let's assume you'll put them in your backyard at home – how do you choose a specific spot? There are a few considerations that are worth paying attention to:

1. **Off the beaten path.** Don't put hives near sidewalks, building entrances or other high-traffic areas. Don't put them where the meter reader must go or where kids play. If you have a small space without many options, put up a flight barrier, six or so feet tall, about ten feet in front of the hives. The bees then must fly up to leave. Once they are up high they'll be out of everyone's way. The barrier could be a hedge, lattice fence, privacy fence or anything that provides an obstruction to flight.
2. **Avoid damp, low-lying areas such as along creek beds.** A variety of bee diseases and parasites thrive in moist conditions.
3. **Full sun is best.** There is a saying, "Bees like sun; beekeepers like shade." In our part of the world our honey bees will not only be healthier but will also be much gentler when kept in full sun. If you don't have a spot in full sun, morning sun with afternoon shade is better than the other way around. Basically, if a spot is sunny enough for a vegetable garden it should be fine for honey bees.
4. **Convenient to desirable water.** If your neighbor has a swimming pool, you had better provide a reliable year-round water source between the hives and the pool. Make the desirable water much more convenient and attractive to a honey bee than undesirable (for people) alternatives. It is up to you to be a good neighbor and proactively prevent your bees from becoming a nuisance. Not everyone has to provide water – it may be that the most convenient water for your bees is a nearby creek, pond or some other "safe" source. But as beekeepers we should always know where our bees are getting their water.
5. **Easy for you to get to.** You are going to inspect your hives frequently, add equipment, take off honey and so forth. Place hives where you can easily wheel in a wagon or even a pickup truck. Make sure there is enough space around the hive to easily disassemble it, place equipment and do other chores that require some room.

6. ***Out of sight, out of mind.*** We are all proud of our honey bees but given a choice, don't place them where they'll be attractive targets for complaining neighbors, vandals or thieves. Yes, people steal bee hives, especially around harvest time. Tucked away in a corner of a backyard, surrounded by a privacy fence, is a better choice than right up by the road for everyone to see.

Of course we must all play with the hand we are dealt and you may not be able to optimize every single one of these points. But given a choice, do what you can.

### Equipment styles

There are lots of options for equipment types. Even among the common standard configurations there are lots of decisions to be made. Deep, medium or shallow boxes, or some combination of those? Pine, cypress, Styrofoam, plastic, cedar or something else? What color? Ten or eight frames? If eight frame, Mann Lake standard or Dadant standard? Plastic, wired wax, unwired wax or no foundation? Plastic or wooden frames? Entrance or internal feeder? If internal: frame, Miller, jar, baggie or something else? Commercial, telescoping or garden top?

February 2016's [Standard Equipment: How Standard is It?](#) talks about this topic. Key considerations for beginners should be interchangeable frames (e.g., same-sized frames in all the boxes that make up the brood chamber) and compatibility with commercially-available add-on equipment such as top feeders. Don't fall for sales pitches about some magic hive that not only prevents disease but makes bees giddy with joy and overflowing with inner peace. For the most part, our bees couldn't care less about what kind of cavity they are in as long as it is big enough and dry. As someone who has taken bees out of walls, floors, hollow trees and even a cabinet in the bathroom of a travel camper (honest!) I can assure you that this is true. Standard equipment configurations are designed to make chores easier for the beekeeper, period. Choose a configuration that does that for you.

Also be sure to take a look at March 2017's [Building on a Firm Foundation](#) and of course April 2016's [Don't Forget the Hive Stand!](#)

### Which bees?

February 2017's [Races of Honey Bees](#) discusses the different types of bees that can be obtained in our area. Brand-new beekeepers spend way too much thought on this topic. Starting out, it is hard to go wrong with good ol' Italians, the default bee that comes in most if not all packages. One reason is for this is that they are gangbuster comb producers, known for filling out foundation with beautiful white comb in a very short time. Another is that they aren't known for being thrifty during nectar shortages; they typically maintain egg-laying and brood-rearing even during the dry summer. That trait may not be desirable for a well-established hive but it is ideal for a brand-new colony that must build up in population from scratch before its first winter.

So my advice is to start with Italians and then, after the colony is well established, replace the Italian queen with one that has what you consider to be more desirable traits. In less than two months the entire colony will have changed over to the new genetics. This way you get the best of both worlds: rapid build-up in the short term followed by desirable traits in the long term.

### What form of bees?

December 2016's [Packages versus Nucs: Want to Fight About It?](#) goes over the options for how to acquire your first bees. Most people start out with packages and there are both advantages and disadvantages to doing so. April 2017's [Package Basics](#) covers the ins and outs of packages. But if you are the type of person who frequently wins the lottery, you may want to think about swarms and cut-outs, described in December 2014's [Free Bees?](#)

I read an article this week that said that after installing nucs or packages, we should feed the bees for a week. That advice may (or may not) be appropriate for the part of the country where the writer lives, but around here





Packages are the most common way to acquire your first honey bee colony.



Lucky beekeepers can retrieve swarms, the equivalent of packages but without the screened box, for free!  
Photo: Rick Brown

we must feed our new bees until they accomplish their goals. That will usually take a couple of months, not just one week. If you begin with anything short of an established colony in a complete hive, you must feed, feed then feed some more. See January 2015's [Yum Yum, Eat 'Em Up!](#) for the whys and hows of feeding.

### Now go get started!

These tips should get a person through the process of installing their first bees into a box, in other words becoming a bona fide beekeeper. That's just the beginning though. To be a successful beekeeper requires ongoing observation, learning and experimentation. But first you have to get started... so what are you waiting for?

*Randall Austin is a NC Master Beekeeper who keeps a few honey bee hives in northern Orange County, NC. He can be reached at [s.randall.austin@gmail.com](mailto:s.randall.austin@gmail.com).*

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