

“Don't be afraid to ask questions. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. I do that every day. Asking for help isn't a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength. It shows you have the courage to admit when you don't know something, and to learn something new.”

– Barack Obama

Part of the fun of beekeeping, for me anyway, is that I'm able to help others as they seek joy pursuing the same hobby as I do. But some folks make providing assistance more work than it needs to be. This is a common issue within my county beekeepers' association's e-mail group. In the classic case, someone will post a note something like this:

“I have a problem that I need help with. I've got a colony that looks bad. What should I do?”

Clearly, we have nothing on which to base a helpful response. The first reply that comes to mind is, “Attend a high-quality bee school!” but some people view that as flippant, although it is actually the best advice they'll ever receive.

Others try to avoid no-information posts with something that looks like:

“I need help! I've got two colonies. I started with 3 last year but I lost two, then my cousin (who lives in Danville) gave me 3, so I had four, but I gave the first one to my friend in Knightdale (he has a landscaping business and has kept bees for 18 months). For the other one, the bees just all left. I think it was because a guy down the road from me has GMO corn. He used to grow tobacco, years ago, but hasn't lately. I've read about GMO corn on the internet. That would explain everything, according to another guy on You-Tube. Anyway, should I replace my queen?”

Another type of post is very logical and efficient but makes my head swim. The reader needs to draw diagrams in order to follow what is being said. I've also seen descriptions like this in some beekeeping textbooks:

“I started with two colonies (A and B) in double deeps. I split both to form A, C, B and D. In fall, I equalized by putting box 2 from A over box 1 of



How would you describe “lots of wax moth pupae on the side of a hive body” in a help request? Do you think a photo would be a lot more informative than a textual description?

D (now called E), box 2 from C over box 1 of A (now F), box 1 from C over box 1 of B (now G), and box 2 of D over box 2 of B (now H). I treated A with Apiguard and B with Formic Pro. I've read that we should rotate Varroa treatments so what should my fall treatment be for E, F, G and H?”

Yet another type of question is one where the person thinks they already know the answer and are looking for confirmation of how smart they are. Those may look like:

“Wax moths killed my bees in one hive and my second colony froze to death (they had plenty of food in the very top of the top box so I know that they couldn't have starved). I'm going to store the frames over winter and then start out next spring doing exactly what I did this year. That's a good idea, right?”

To get the best, most relevant advice maybe we should act as if the person we are asking is being paid by the hour. Only the key facts need to be shared, but we must share all of them. Concise is good – it helps prevent going off in irrelevant directions – but completeness is critical as well.

The list below of information to include in a help request isn't perfect and doesn't include every question for every situation, but as a general guideline, be sure to mention:

1. Is the colony new this year or was it overwintered?
2. If it is a first-year colony, how and from where did you get the bees (nuc, package, complete hive, caught swarm), and how long ago was that?
3. When did you make Varroa mite load assessments this year and what were the results each time? (See "[I Don't See Any Mites](#)" and "[Effective Varroa Management Must Begin with Monitoring](#)" for more information on how to assess mite loads.)
4. When did you apply Varroa-control treatments and methods this year and what were the results?
5. What is your equipment configuration (size and number of brood boxes, other equipment on the hive, hive type if not Langstroth, etc.)?
6. Roughly how many frames/combs are covered by honey bees?
7. How many eggs, larvae and capped brood are in the hive now, both workers and drones?
8. When did you last see the queen? Eggs? Open larvae? Capped pupae?
9. Are there queen cells? Are they open with larva, capped or empty? If empty, is there a hole in one side?
10. Roughly how much pollen is in the hive now?
11. Roughly how much stored syrup/nectar/honey (in terms of number of frames) is in the hive now?
12. Have you consulted with the State Apiary Inspector assigned to your county and if so, what was her/his conclusion? (See "[Who Ya Gonna Call](#)" for information on the NC DA&CS Apiary Services Division.)
13. Perhaps most important of all, the old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" is certainly true when diagnosing colony health issues from a distance. It is a rare person these days who doesn't have a cell phone, and a rare phone that doesn't come with at least a basic camera. Use it!



This photo needs no description. It clearly shows classic starvation with the brood nest tantalizing close, but not close enough, to honey stores. Photo: Lloyd Frick

Note that this list includes facts, not subjective guesses about what the problems are. A few years ago, there was an article in a major regional newspaper about a beekeeper whose colonies had been poisoned by some unidentified social deviates. The story was the Talk of the Town in the beekeeping community for several weeks. What wasn't included in the article was the fact that our Apiary Inspectors had made a careful assessment of the situation and determined that the colonies hadn't been poisoned after all; they had starved to death. The point is that starting out with a predetermined conclusion can easily lead to a tidy, logical and completely wrong answer that will do absolutely nothing to prevent the same thing from happening again. Taking steps to prevent colony-poisoning will do nothing to avert overwinter starvation.

Ask questions! That's how we learn. As we do so, remember that it takes the right questions with the right details to get the right answers!

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