

Hiving Your Package Bees

Below are some tips that review basic material from the Lewis County Beekeepers' Association's Apprentice Beekeeping class. Check with a bee mentor if you have questions!

Before You Hive Your Bees:

Choose Your Apiary Location: Face your hives east or southeast, ideally in a place with good sun exposure for warmth, but also some windbreaks and shelter available. Be sure that your bees have a clear flight path to and from the hive. It's useful to set up in a way that lets you work the hives from the back or sides. Avoid hilltops (too windy) or depressions (where cold air & moisture will settle).

Have hive boxes assembled and ready: It's a good idea to coat the assembled hive boxes in primer, then paint with a non-oil-based paint to help prevent moisture from warping the wood. Decide whether you want a screened or solid bottom board. Many favor screened bottom boards to aid in ventilating the hive. Be sure your inner cover (with one-inch notch to allow an upper entrance/exit) and telescoping cover are ready. Also have an entrance reducer on hand to help the colony defend itself (see below).

Be ready to feed your package bees: Feeding your bees a 1:1 sugar:water solution will promote wax production, which they need to draw comb. You can feed via a Boardman feeder, a top bucket feeder, a division board. All have their pros and cons. Whichever you choose, have it ready to go when you hive the bees.

Have a water supply ready, either a Boardman feeder or a nearby container like a poultry waterer with stones inserted so the bees don't fall in and drown. Having a clean reliable water supply by the hive will minimize foraging energy your bees use finding water. If you use a Boardman, be sure the holes in the lid are very small – otherwise on sunny days the heating of the glass will make water drench out.

Picking Up Your Bees:

When you pick up your package: Check to be sure your bees are alive. Note – some dead bees in the package are to be expected. These are workers swept into the package, some of which will be nearing the end of their lifespan anyway.

Transporting bees from pickup location to your home: Be sure the package has air supply as you drive home. Don't stick them in the trunk! If you are concerned about bees flying around your car, consider bringing a large cardboard box with holes poked in and letting the package ride inside that. If there are a few "hitchhiker bees" clinging on the side of the package, that's normal. They will likely stay right there.

When To Hive the Bees: If the weather is 50 degrees or more and not raining, you'll want to hive your bees that day. If not, you can wait till next day, but need to hive them soon. Keep them in a cool, sheltered place while you wait. If it is a rainy stretch of days, consider getting a pop-up shelter over the hive and doing the hiving under that.

Just Before You Hive:

- Spray the package with a sugar water mix – don't soak them, but the sugar water spray promotes grooming and can help calm the bees after their stressful journey. If you wait till the next day to hive them, spray again about half an hour before you hive.
- Have a small marshmallow or candy plug on hand for the queen cage (see below).
- Have a tack or staple gun ready to attach the queen cage to a frame.
- Have your hive tool on hand.
- Have your protective gear ready to wear.

How to Hive the Bees:

Pull out the syrup jar using your hive tool, then pull out the queen cage. It's a good idea to have a piece of wood to cover the hole to keep the bees inside. Discard the syrup jar – its contents will almost certainly contain corn syrup, not good bee food.

Check the queen cage: is the queen alive? (If not, hive the bees, then contact the supplier for a replacement queen ASAP). If the queen is alive, pry out the cork in the queen cage – cover the hole with your thumb the instant you get the cork out so the queen can't escape. Then quickly insert the marshmallow or candy plug. (It should take about 2 days for the workers to eat through the candy and release the queen – by the time they have, her pheromones should have "claimed" the bees.)

Hang the queen cage in the center or near center of the hive box between two frames, candy plug down – then tack or staple the metal tab to the top of one of the adjacent frames. Be sure NOT to place the screened part of the queen cage flush against a frame – the mesh should be facing the "bee space" so that she has an air supply.

We do NOT recommend shaking your bees into the hive: many will be clinging to the outside of the package and can have their feet torn off or damaged by shaking. Instead, we recommend that you insert the bees in their package in one of two ways – with either, you can remove the package box in a day or two:

- Method one: Remove enough frames to make space in the hive box for the package. After you insert the queen cage, insert the package into the space made by the frames you removed, then take off the wood cover or whatever you covered the hole made by the syrup can, put on the inner cover and, depending on your feeding method (see below), the telescoping cover. Check the next day – the bees should have recruited to the frames around the queen, so you can remove the empty package and re-insert frames.

- Method two: Put the package into an empty hive body on top of the bottom board, then put the hive body with the queen and all ten frames on top. Check the next day – the bees should have gone up into the box with the queen, and you can remove the empty hive box and package.
- For both methods: If some bees are hanging around in the package, tilt the package up against the hive entrance – the bees should soon recruit in to the queen.

Feed Your Package Bees:

- If you are using a top bucket feeder, put that on, cover with an empty hive box, then put on your telescoping cover.
- If you are using a Boardman, insert that into the hive entrance.
- If you are using a division board feeder, that takes up two frames' worth of space and should abut the side of the box so as not to interfere with bees' drawing comb on central frames - so you may want to go with method two for hiving, above. If there are bees still in the package box, put the box next to the hive entrance, ideally touching it, and the remaining bees should enter the hive.

Insert the Entrance Reducer. This helps the new colony defend against intruders or robbing. The entrance reducer should have about a one-inch opening.

Provide a Water Source: see above.

After 48 Hours, Check the Queen Cage. If the workers have not eaten through the marshmallow or candy plug yet, release the queen yourself and remove the cage. If the queen has been released, great: inspect in about 5 to 7 days to look for brood. If you find no brood within 10 days, the queen may be dead or not well mated; either way, you'll need to requeen the hive. You may want to check with a "bee mentor" for help with this.

Have Fun Watching Your Bees at Work! Take time to sit by the hive and observe their behavior so that you get familiar with what's normal for them, and let them get used to your presence. Remember to inspect every 10 days in "swarm season" to be sure your bees aren't making swarm cells and have enough room for expansion: remember the "rule of 7" and add a second deep body when the bees have drawn and mainly filled 7 frames with comb, food, and brood.

Compiled by Lewis County Beekeepers' Association Secretary Susanne Weil