

How much does it cost to set up a hive with bees?

To buy a beginner's kit and a nucleus of bees commercially from an agent is a significant outlay: at time of writing, probably between £500 and £1000 or even more. BUT one of the advantages of joining an Association like FBKA is that equipment, hives and colonies of bees are often moved on from one member to another at a fraction of commercial prices. If you attend the apiary sessions, you'll pick up news of opportunities.

What type of hive is the best?

The most popular hive in the United Kingdom is the National hive. This is a squarely built, practical hive of an appropriate size for our conditions.

The cottage-garden tradition hive is the WBC. If you want a couple of hives in your garden and want them to look good, the WBC is a good option. Don't be put off by some beekeepers who will say they're impractical. Yes, they are awkward to move to a field of rape or a heather covered mountain, but if you want to stay with a small-scale hobby, you probably won't want to move them. There are more manipulations of boxes and covers involved during inspections, which is why people with a lot of colonies tend not to use them.

Our advice is that you start with a National or WBC. There are others, though. Options fall into two main categories:

1. The other frame hives: Smith, Commercial, Langstroth, Dadant, Rose & more. Consumables like frames, wax foundation and so on are available for these but not as readily in quantity as for the National and WBC.
2. Non-frame hives and alternative design hives, such as top-bar hives, Warre hives, Flow hive.

(A note on the Flow Hive, a relatively new design from Australia. We do NOT recommend this for a beginner bee-keeper. It's selling points are all to do with ease of access to a honey crop. As a beginner – and an experienced – bee-keeper, your focus has to be on how to keep bees well.)

Finally, it's not unusual to be tempted by equipment from more than one source. That's fine, but do not mix hives of different type and dimensions. You will need to interchange frames and boxes across hives and realising that they do not measure up with each other is something you do not want to experience when you already have a frame or box of bees in your hand mid-way through a procedure.

What are beehives made of?

Hives are made from red cedar, or pine/deal and similar woods. Cedar wood contains natural oils, which help preserve the wood and discourages insect attack. Pine, or deal, is less expensive and can be treated with the non-toxic, water-based shed/fence paints but NOT gloss paints (these simply peel off because of the warm moisture permeating through the wood from the inside). Polystyrene hives are also available and used by many

commercial beekeepers. These are lighter to manipulate but a high-density polystyrene is necessary to keep them in good repair.

One way of reducing the costs of bee-keeping if you – or people you know – are good at the work-bench, is to build your own hives. Recycled pine or other boards are fine for this. Nail-holes and other damage can be carefully plugged and the bees are really not fussy. They don't know about red cedar. Plans for how to build hives are freely available on the internet. Don't be tempted to re-cycle an old oak sideboard, though. You need a lightweight wood. When boxes are full of bees and honey they are HEAVY. Having a bench saw and a router make the job quicker. Getting the dimensions exact is important. That, after all, is the essential element in Lorenzo Lorraine Langstroth's invention of the removable frame hive in the 1850s.

Do I need a big garden?

No. Of course, if you live in the countryside with a large garden, you have an ideal location. However, beehives can be found on numerous roofs and balconies in big cities. With the parks and small town gardens packed with plants, there is excellent forage for bees in built up areas. The key element in tight situations is being able to place the hive so that the flight path of the bees does not intersect with the working, strolling, playing, wash-day path of neighbours or yourselves.

Do the hive entrances have to face one way?

Ideally they should be faced either south-east, south or south-west. That's what the bees choose when they're searching for new homes. Level ground is needed, both to keep the hive stable (they can get very tall) and for yourself when tending. Ensure they do not face directly onto a footpath or road because people walking by may get stung.

Will the bees help my plants?

Yes, they will pollinate your fruit trees and soft fruit and the crops will be bigger, better, tastier and more regularly shaped.

Do I need planning permission?

No.

Will bees cause a nuisance to my neighbours?

Possibly - make sure you site the hives so that the bees will not fly out of the hive and straight across your neighbour's garden. Bees do have cleansing flights and are prone to "doing their business" over the neighbours washing line. Try to chat to your neighbours about the interesting hobby, encourage them to put on your spare veil and look into your hive and make sure they are well supplied with honey.

Where can I learn the basics of beekeeping?

The best way is to join a beginner's course. Furness Beekeepers run courses in late winter, indoors, and at their apiaries on Saturday mornings from mid-April to September. More information elsewhere on this web site.

What else do I need to start?

A hive tool, a smoker, a feeder, a veil and a pair of gloves.

Will I get stung?

You can't call yourself a beekeeper until you've been stung! Treat the bees gently, don't flap your arms about or look in the hive if the weather is not suitable. Always wear the correct protective clothing and move SLOWLY. Bees' vision is attuned to fast movement. If you sweep a hand across the top of an open hive bees are likely to be on that hand and wrist far more quickly than you can avoid. Do the motion again slowly and they will not react at all. More good practice on handling bees is demonstrated at the apiaries.

Do I need lots of time to look after bees properly?

No. In the summer months, you need to look into the hive once a week. In the winter, you just need to check they have food, perhaps once a month. However, if you're stressed after a hard day's work, sit and watch the hive entrance, it's very therapeutic and relaxing.

How do I get the honey out of the hive and into the jars?

First you need to get the bees out of the super which is full of honey - there are quite a few ways to do this. The most common is to use two bee escapes (a one-way valve) in a board. The bees can go down but not come back up into the super. Remove the super to a bee tight clean room. Carefully remove the cappings, put the frames into an extractor (you can borrow one from the Association for the first year at least) and spin out the honey. Strain it and leave it to settle. Then put it into the jars and label it. Again, more detailed advice is available at the apiaries.

Are there any other useful hive products?

Yes. Beeswax can be made into candles, polish, food covering cloths and cosmetics. It is also used in a million different ways.

Can I sell honey?

Yes. Put up a sign at your front gate or take some jars to work with you. There is a big demand for local honey. You should consult the labelling regulations, which are available from a number of sources on the web.

Do they need feeding in the winter?

Yes. First you should check their stores in autumn and feed, if necessary, with sugar syrup to make sure they have sufficient. You should check – or heft - the hives every month or so. If they feel light, particularly in late winter - put on some fondant sugar.

Are there many diseases and pests to treat?

There are a few problems to watch out for. The most persistent issue of recent years is the mite Varroa Destructor. You must monitor the levels of this mite regularly and treat the colony to reduce it when necessary. More detail on this comes with the training.

What type of bees are the best?

Local ones. Why? (A) They are more likely to be acclimatised to Cumbrian conditions. (B) there is less likelihood of bringing in pests and diseases from other regions and countries. There is a responsibility here. If those things are brought in the problem would not be confined to your own hives.

That's a point, does anyone need to be told I've got bees?

Well, it is no crime to keep bees secretly. Of course, neighbours will notice. The main issue, however, is the shared responsibility. You are not keeping a confined domestic animal. You are providing a home for and making a relationship with a freely roaming – and mixing - wild creature. Others in your area are doing the same. For this to be done in ways that avoid danger to the bees, responses to diseases and pests have to be co-ordinated. Such is the importance of bees in our shared environment and in our food economy that, quite rightly, we require of our shared governance a service in spreading and maintaining good practice and monitoring for threats to the health of the bee population. This takes the form of the National Bee Unit, a government-funded agency which carries out spot-check inspections and advises bee-keepers as well as monitoring to prevent the import of further pests and diseases. When you join Furness Beekeepers we will inform you of our intention to pass on your details and location to the NBU. They will frequently publish advice and alerts to you.