

BECOMING A BEEKEEPER

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Honey bees are an important part of our agricultural world. We know that they are responsible for about \$5 billion of food crops annually. However we do not know the extent of their effect on pollination of food plants for wildlife. No background studies have been done so that today we can only guess that honey bees provide important pollination for the nuts, fruits and berries necessary for wildlife.

Previous to the 1980s the forests were filled with feral honey bees living in hollow trees. Honey bees were also in great numbers kept by beekeepers. However the devastating parasitic mites, arriving in the 1980s, brought the death of feral bees. Today almost all honey bees are being kept by beekeepers.

Anyone, whether living in urban or suburban places or rural, can be a beekeeper. But beekeeping is not for everyone. Like many crafts, skills must be learned in order to be successful. Fortunately throughout Virginia about 35 local beekeeping associations exist. In addition there is a large and active state association, Virginia State Beekeepers Association.

A number of the local beekeeping associations hold classes for beginner beekeepers. These are usually held in late winter and early spring, just before the ideal time to begin in April. These classes provide the basic information to start beekeeping and frequently provide a way to obtain the equipment and the bees. Mentors are usually an important part of beginning beekeeping so the local associations make certain that their class members each have a helpful, experienced beekeeper for the beginning student.

Beginning beekeepers are encouraged to attend their local association meetings through the year, as well as to attend the two state meetings. Conversations with experienced beekeepers and the benefits gained from the presentations all benefit the beginning beekeeper.

One great advantage to beekeeping is that bees do not require daily attention. Other livestock, such as chickens or goats, require almost daily care. During the winter months the bees are taking care of themselves. Tasks during spring, summer and early autumn can be at the beekeeper's decision.

Care for a colony of bees involves feeding when necessary, control of one parasitic mite, and an occasional overall health inspection. Since bees are totally dependent on plants for their food, monitoring their food supply is important. The parasitic mite, called varroa, can be controlled both with some natural medicines and with some hive equipment. Bees can become diseased but it is not common.

Beginning beekeepers should start with two colonies of bees, if possible. In this way a beginning beekeeper can compare the progress of each of the colonies. If one colony seems to be strong and flourishing it can be used to support a colony that is not performing well. Two hives provides a chance to compare and contrast the colonies.

The basic necessary outfit for the beekeeper is a beekeeper's veil—to be worn at all times when visiting the hives. The hive tool is important for removing the parts inside the hive. The smoker is an essential part of beekeeping since the smoke keeps the bees calm during hive inspections. Fuel for the smoker is quite easy to obtain—dry pine needles from the frequently-planted white pines. Instead of the heavy leather gloves shown in equipment catalogs, the inexpensive rubber dishwashing gloves are recommended. The cost for these basics for the beekeeper is about \$75-100. With reasonable care the veil, hive tool and smoker will last many years.

For a single hive, the basic wooden parts are: a screened bottom board (the “floor” of the hive), three boxes containing the inner parts of frames and foundation (guides for comb building by the bees), and two covers. These parts are available from beekeeping equipment suppliers. Cost will be approximately \$100.

The bees themselves will cost approximately \$75. Bees are available from local associations or from equipment suppliers.

Virginia has a branch of a nationwide equipment supplier, in business since the late 1800s. Dadant and Sons, Inc. Headquarters are in Hamilton, IL but the branch is in Chatham, VA, phone 800-220-8325; website: www.dadant.com

Contacts for beekeeping information:

Virginia State Beekeepers Association www.virginiabeekeepers.com (site under reconstruction)

Northern Piedmont Beekeepers Association (counties of Fauquier, Rappahannock, Culpeper, Madison, Orange) www.npbee.org

Central Virginia Beekeepers Association – West Albemarle County
www.centralvirginiabeekeepers.org