

10 MISTAKES NEW BEEKEEPERS MAKE

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Many new beekeepers learn things the hard way. As a beekeeping instructor, it's my job to keep my students from meeting this all too common fate! Read on to find out the mistakes I see most often and how to avoid them.

With so much to learn as a new beekeeper, missteps are as inevitable as bee stings! Yet failures do provide an opportunity for learning. I often console my students after such events with the phrase, "It happens to us all" and this is absolutely true. I see the same set of errors over and over again. Many of them I made myself as a beginner! I hope this list will keep some of you from following in my footsteps.

1. Assessing colony health based solely on the level of 'bee traffic'.

I encourage beekeepers to observe their hives from the outside on a weekly or even daily basis. There *is* useful information to gain by doing this. You may observe if your bees are bringing pollen or even catch a pesky ant invasion. It's also a good idea to make yourself familiar with what is 'normal' for your bees in terms of traffic (the number of bees flying in and out of the hive), also in regards to the number of dead bees near your hive. That way you can recognize any changes if and when they happen. ***Despite these merits, observation from the outside is no substitute for hive inspections.*** Often if a problem is noticeable from the outside of the hive, it has progressed too far to be remedied. Inspections, when done properly, will catch problems early and give the beekeeper a chance to fix them before too much damage is done. Inspections also provide new beekeepers with the opportunity to learn. For that reason, I recommend that new beekeepers inspect their hives once every 2-4 weeks, but no more often than that. Inspections are stressful for bees and they disturb the carefully controlled atmospheric conditions within the hive. Many experienced beekeepers perform less frequent inspections on their older, more established colonies because of this. To a new newbie, this can sound like a catch-22, but I firmly believe new beekeepers should inspect their hives regularly for learning purposes and because it is likely that their colonies are also new and therefore less stable.

2. Not recognizing queenlessness.

This was my first big mistake as a new beekeeper and I do my best to make sure others avoid it. Many new beekeepers have the misconception that colonies that lose their queen will alter their behavior in such a dramatic way that it will be obvious that something is wrong. They observe plentiful bee traffic at the entrance, they inspect and find lots of honey and bees inside! They make the mistake that everything is going well, because they are not looking carefully at their bees. So what happens when your colony loses its queen? At first everything will look normal to the untrained eye. The population will remain close to the same, bees will continue to forage, build comb and feed larvae. However, without a queen to lay eggs, your hive's population will gradually decline. The first sign will be a lack of eggs, then a lack of young larvae, eventually your colony will have no brood at all. ***A beehive cannot survive without its queen. Every day worker bees will die of old age and they will not be replaced.*** The population will start to noticeably drop. You may see an increase in honey and pollen because without any larvae to care for the bees can focus entirely on foraging. If your colony is queenless for too long, they hit a point of no return. This is why I make all of my students learn to recognize eggs. ***Finding eggs in your hive tells you not only that you had a queen as of at least three days ago, but it tells you that she is laying!*** Her one, all-important function. I check for eggs every single time I inspect a hive and encourage all of my students to do the same. This one rule has saved so many of my students from losing their colonies.

3. Leaving out frames or placing empty supers.

If there is one practical thing you should know about the behavior of bees as a new beekeeper, it's that they will build comb in any empty space you give them. Beehive hardware is designed with this in mind and everything fits just so to keep bees building only in the spaces you want them to build in. Langstroth hives are built in two styles

meant to hold either 10 or 8 frames. ***If you put less frames in than the box is meant to hold, the bees will build rogue comb in the empty space.*** If you add a super to your hive and you do not put in the frames, you will end up with a whole box of cross comb attached to the roof of your hive. This can be a real mess to fix and there is no reason to do it! So, always make sure you have the proper number of frames in your hives. *****Some exceptions I should mention are, beekeepers may prefer to use one less frame in their boxes (9 frames instead of 10) to give them more room to work hives during inspections. As long as you space your frames evenly this is acceptable. Also, one feeding technique involves adding an empty super and placing a feeder inside. If you do this, you should place an inner cover between the bees and this empty super with the feeder, you should also take care to remove the super once you are no longer feeding.***

4. Harvesting honey too early or taking too much.

It can be difficult to know how much or when to take honey from your colony. As general rule of thumb, ***do not take honey from a colony in its first year.*** Often the bees aren't strong enough yet to make an excess amount and they need every drop they have to make it through winter. If your colony is strong and has plentiful stores, how much you can harvest varies greatly by geographical location. In Southern California, I like to leave my colonies with at least 40lbs of honey (for reference, a single deep frame filled with honey can weigh 8-10lbs). In cold climates I have been told the bees need at least 100lbs. It is devastating to lose a hive to starvation after a honey harvest. Be conservative. Seek advice from local beeks on how much honey should be left with the bees.

5. Not feeding new colonies.

In general, I think beekeepers feed their bees sugar water too readily and often to the detriment of their bees, but there are a few exceptions and this is one of them. When you buy a package of bees, you **MUST** feed them. Package bees are confused, weak and they have no honey. It takes at least a month of consistent feeding to get them on their feet. If you fail to do this, you will likely lose the colony in the fall. Unless you are in a particularly nectar-rich area, you typically must feed nucleus colonies as well. For those who are hesitant to feed, I suggest you let your nuc sit for a week and then inspect to see if they are building any new comb. If they are not, you need to feed them. ***Feeding will stimulate starter colonies to build new comb and increase their population.*** It is critical that new colonies do this in the spring if they are to survive the winter. As far as feeding swarms goes, it's not always necessary, but if you notice your swarm is not growing in size it is a good idea to step in and feed them. You can read my in depth opinion on feeding in my previous post: [Should I Feed My Bees?](#)

6. Placing your hive in a troublesome location.

When placing your hive, you want to find a level, clear space in ideally full sun. Make sure you have enough room to stand and work comfortably behind the hive and/or to the side of it. I can't tell you how many times I've gone to help a new beekeeper and found that they had placed their hive on an unstable slope or in the middle of some thorny rose bushes. Consider also where you face the entrance to the hive. For about 5-10 feet, there will be a high amount of bee activity on that side of the hive. You do not want to face it at a neighbor's pool or at your vegetable garden. Make sure to place your hive so that there is about a 10ft radius of unfrequented space.

7. Not properly suiting up.

New beekeepers tend to have a slightly idealized concept of what beekeeping will be like. They see videos of experienced beekeepers inspecting their hives with no bee suit on and they think they can do the same. The truth is even seasoned beekeepers get stung when they are not wearing their suit, but they know how to keep the bees calm and what to do if they aren't calm. This is something you may learn with time, but for now it's better to play it safe and suit up. ***Even if you do not have an allergy, too many stings can land you in the hospital.*** Just because your bees were calm during one inspection, does not mean they will always be calm. Bee temperament is influenced by many factors, so resist the urge to draw judgements based on only a few inspections. It takes time to get to know

your bees. Be patient. I've heard several stories from students who made this mistake. Some deliberately did not wear their suit, others put their suit on only part of the way or wore improper footwear and were taken by surprise when the bees started stinging. Always suit up and double check your zippers and weak points before opening your hive. Ignoring this lesson could seriously jeopardize your health and may turn you off beekeeping prematurely.

****This is especially true in Africanized bee zones.**

8. Not using your smoker.

Natural beekeepers are sometimes reluctant to use their smoker. The smoke makes the bees think a wildfire is near and triggers them to gorge on honey. The bees do this so that if they need to evacuate, they do not lose all their honey. It keeps them distracted from what you are doing and the smell of the smoke also blocks chemical signals the bees send to one another. Signals that might organize a defense attack against you. To a new beekeeper, this can all sound pretty stressful. It might lead them to believe that they are better off not smoking their bees. Or maybe the beekeeper just did not know exactly what the smoke did and they are taken by surprise when the bees attacked them. Either way, I am going to make the case for why you should always have your smoker. ***When you do not use your smoker the bees will likely react defensively. They will sting your beesuit and they will die.*** You may end up killing a large number of bees in this way and you could also endanger your neighbors if the bees become especially agitated. Neighbors who get stung tend not to be very understanding. They may report you to the city or worse, they may try to vandalize your hive. At the very least they may result in bad PR for backyard beekeepers and in the end that doesn't help any of us, including the bees! Now, there are some alternatives to smoke that some believe are less stressful. Essential oil and water mixtures that you can spray in a squirt bottle or some simply spray sugar water. I am not against experimenting with these methods, but you should still have a smoker on hand because it is the most effective. Personally, I think the concept of a wildfire is a whole lot more natural than spraying bees with sugar water or oils so, I prefer to use a smoker.

9. Starting with just one colony.

I recommend that you start with at least two colonies. Managing two hives instead of one will not take much more work and it has several advantages. First, when you have two colonies, you learn more. Simply being able to compare two hives side by side will provide opportunities for this, but you could also test for specific theories. Maybe you want to try two different hives styles or two different breeds of bees. You might compare the success of a nuc vs. a package. Second, having two hives will give you management advantages. Maybe one colony is weak, while the other is strong. You could take some brood from the strong colony to help boost your weak colony. Maybe you lose a queen in one colony and they fail to make a new one. You can take eggs from your other colony to try and make your queenless colony queenright. Lastly, new beekeepers often lose their hives. Having two gives you a better change of keeping one alive in your first year.

10. Being satisfied with a limited knowledge of beekeeping.

I have met many a backyard beekeeper who seemed content with the fact that they do not understand what they are looking at when they go into their hives to do an inspection. They are happy to leave the bees mostly alone and then go in every once in awhile to take honey or to make sure there are still bees inside. Personally, this always shocks me. Learning about the bees is the best part of beekeeping! They are such fascinating creatures, the more I learn, the more I want to know. It's easy to get overwhelmed with all the information on beekeeping and just sort of give up on understanding, but anything worth doing, is worth doing right. Make the effort. There are so many resources available. Classes, mentors, books, documentaries, forums, blogs, YouTube videos! Find what works for you and never stop learning. Uneducated hobbyists make us all look the fool.