



Information for New Beekeepers

– Welcome to the Middlesex County Beekeepers Association. The MCBA meets monthly, on the fourth Friday of the month at the First Religious Society, 27 School St. in Carlisle. In the summer and early-fall, we meet instead on the second

Saturday afternoon at a member's

home so that we can work with some hives. We welcome new members!

This sheet outlines some basic sources of information for new beekeepers and anyone who may be considering the hobby. Although western honey bees (*Apis mellifera*) have been kept for thousands of years and are perhaps the most studied creature on Earth after human beings, you will still find considerable divergence in beekeeping beliefs and recommendations. Some of this traces to legitimate differences in local conditions, beekeeping objectives, individual style, and other factors. Especially now with the internet, however, there is a significant amount of misinformation, bad advice, and just plain whacky ideas floating around. So, the purpose of this outline is to point you to some basic, solid, scientifically-backed sources of beekeeping information to help get you going.

Organizations – Beyond the MCBA, virtually every state and county has a beekeeping club; most have good websites:

- MCBA middlesexbeekeepers.org has a public website, but please join the club for access to the members-only section, which has loads of information including back issues of the highly useful MCBA monthly newsletter, *The Middlesex Bee*.
- Other nearby county clubs (*Worcester County, Essex County, Norfolk County, and Plymouth County*) are also very good; some MCBA members also belong to these, too, as they all have excellent websites and run good programs
- Massachusetts Beekeepers Association massbee.org – Mass Bee conducts three all-day meetings per year, including the terrific outdoor early-June meeting held at UMass Amherst
- In general, across the country, most state and county beekeeping association websites are very good and some are excellent, but be careful to focus on those with local weather and other characteristics most like our area

Classes – Highly recommended; generally run in the early winter, to get you prepared for a spring launch

- Newton Community Education newtoncommunityed.org – Program at Newton North High School

- New England Beekeeping nebees.com/schools.php – Two programs offered by Rick Reault through Acton Boxborough Community Education
- Essex County Beekeepers essexcountybeekeepers.org – Excellent program at the Topsfield Fairgrounds

Introductory How-To Books – Mostly available on Amazon; a variety of more advanced and specialized beekeeping books are also available from Wicwas Press wicwas.com; be sure to buy the most recent edition of any book

- *Beekeeping For Dummies* (Blackiston) – Despite the title, a very good basic introductory book
- *The Beekeeper's Handbook* (Sammataro, Avitabile) – More detailed on practical beekeeping, and even better
- *Honey Bee Biology and Beekeeping* (Caron, Connor) – Overall the best; well-illustrated and worth the price

Find a Mentor – Although not absolutely necessary, an experienced beekeeper who can look over your shoulder and answer questions can help you avoid many mistakes; find someone who lives nearby and is willing to visit frequently.

Monthly Publications – Two excellent monthly magazines are available by subscription, in print and/or online:

- *Bee Culture* beeculture.com – Slightly more oriented to less experienced beekeepers
- *American Bee Journal* americanbeejournal.com – Slightly more serious, including research updates

Websites and Online Forums – There is much valuable (*and unfortunately a lot of bad*) information online, we suggest the following good sources:

- Honey Bee Suite honeybeesuite.com – Recently focused on tangential topics, but the archives are excellent
- Scientific Beekeeping scientificbeekeeping.com – a mix of some basic and some very technical information
- Bee-L community.lsoft.com/scripts/wa-LSOFTDONATIONS.exe?A0=BEE-L – a list serve with generally more advanced discussion, but the 25-year archives contain authoritative answers to practically any question
- Dave Cushman dave-cushman.net is encyclopedic, but keep in mind different British weather/equipment

YouTube Videos – Can be extraordinarily valuable; try to search by expert, not by topic, as the YouTube search engine apparently ranks by quantity of postings and views, not quality; some of the least useful videos get ranked at the top. We highly recommend the following:

- A Year In The Life of An Apiary – Though now a bit dated (1993), an excellent introduction to beekeeping by Dr. Keith Delaplane, University of Georgia; series of 25 short videos (*total 3+hours*); ideally, watch them in sequence

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- University of Guelph uoguelph.ca/honeybee/videos.shtml – Awesome introductory set of videos
- David Burns – EAS Master Beekeeper with 175+ videos, from basic to some more advanced topics
- National Honey Show honeyshow.co.uk/lecture-videos.php – Hours of outstanding lectures, though generally not how-to, mostly by American beekeeping experts, from the annual British beekeeping convention

Regulations – Beekeeping is generally lightly regulated, but check at town hall about possible local requirements

- Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources mass.gov/apiary-program-honey-bees – MDAR conducts a voluntary registration and inspection program; some serious situations (e.g. American Foulbrood) are aggressively regulated
- Municipal Regulations – These vary considerably by town, from essentially none to requirements for registration, hive placement, notification of neighbors, etc., so be sure to check your town's Board of Health and zoning regulations (generally available online) to see if your town has any special requirements relating to bees.

Sources of Equipment – Now three main general hobbyist suppliers, since Brushy Mountain went out of business and Kelley was acquired by Mann Lake; all are very good; best to pick one, as hive component dimensions may vary slightly

- BetterBee betterbee.com
- Dadant dadant.com
- Mann Lake mannlakeltd.com

Sources of Bees – Basic start-up choice is a package or nucleus colony (nuc); your introductory beekeeping classes will discuss the pros and cons, and how to install each into your equipment; packages, nucs, and some equipment are available from:

- New England Beekeeping, Rick Reault nebees.com – Tyngsboro; Italian and Carniolan bees
- Warm Colors Apiary, Dan Conlon warmcolorsapiary.com – Deerfield; Russian bees (varroa resistant)
- Crystal Bee Supply, Vin and Joe Gaglione crystalbeesupply.com – Peabody
- Beekeepers' Warehouse, Nancy Mangion beekeeperswarehouse.com – Woburn
- B-Line Apiaries b-lineapiaries.com – Hudson, NH
- Agricultural Hall, aghall.com/beekeeping.html – (VSH packages) Boston, MA

Varroa Treatments – “Treatment free” beekeeping is not a realistic option for new beekeepers. Left untreated, varroa mites will kill your hives, and your varroa-related hive crash will generate a “mite bomb” that spreads varroa to other hives in a 2-3 mile radius. Approaches often recommended

by treatment-free beekeepers have been proven ineffective, and hives with varroa resistant queens (e.g., VSH, Russian) nevertheless need treatment. Varroa can be effectively managed with regular monitoring, and treatment when your hives exceed the treatment threshold. See:

- Honey Bee Health Coalition honeybeehealthcoalition.org/varroa – Authoritative guide and videos
- Bee Informed Partnership beeinformed.org – Annual survey of survival and management approaches
- Scientific Beekeeping scientificbeekeeping.com – Randy Oliver is a leading researcher of varroa treatments

A FEW WARNINGS – Know in advance what you are getting into, and some of the major issues you may face:

- Knowledge Intensive – Beekeeping is a knowledge-intensive and time consuming hobby to be successful...
- Cost of Entry – The cost of starting is not the few hundred dollars of a basic hive set-up and a package of bees, but more like a few thousand dollars for two hives and all of the equipment you will need to care for your hives in the first year
- Bees Don't Need Saving – Despite news stories of 40% annual losses, the number of U.S. honey bee hives has grown from about 2.5 to 3 million hives over the last 10 years, driven by almond pollination economics
- Environmental Impact – In any case, you personally are not going to save the bees; indeed, if you don't actively monitor and treat for varroa your hives will die, you will spread mites to your neighbors, and the viruses vectored by these mites will infect many native bee species (which are under increased pressure)
- Treatments Can Be Dangerous – Some of the best varroa treatments can be very dangerous, so always follow the instructions on the label closely and wear protective gear, especially for oxalic acid and formic acid treatments
- Bad Information – There's a saying that if you ask 10 Beekeepers a question that you'll get 11 different answers; unfortunately not all of those answers will be correct. The sources we have suggested, and our experienced members can point you in the right direction.

ALLERGIC REACTIONS – You (*and perhaps family members*) will get stung; a very small percentage of people are highly allergic to bee stings and can develop anaphylactic shock if stung; understand the symptoms mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/bee-stings/symptoms-causes/syc-20353869, know if this may be a risk for you or your family members, and call 911 immediately if an anaphylactic reaction occurs.