

FROM US TO YOU

COMMENT

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Why can't the bee suppliers get it right and make things much easier for us?

MANY readers of both *Gleanings* and the *BKQ* will probably know that I'm not a full time beekeeper. I never have more than a dozen colonies, and almost always fewer than 5 or 6. And, like others in the past few years, sometimes I don't have any in the spring. But this year there were 5 out there alive, well, and needing attention. And this year there were 3 more packages that came in that needed all manner of attention and preparation. And this is what this is all about; those packages and that preparation.

Packages are big business in the US. I understand they aren't nearly as attractive in much of the rest of the world though. Beekeepers everywhere else must get their bees a different way than we do I guess, perhaps in full-sized colonies or nucs, maybe as swarms chased or captured or out of buildings, or maybe just a divide from a larger colony owned by another beekeeper.

There are some photos of the typical container we get our bees in – the screened package, and how they are filled. These containers will hold either two or three pounds (about 6500 or 10,000) of bees, a queen, and a small tin can of high fructose corn syrup for food for the duration the bees are confined in the package. It may be only a day or two, or as much as a week that they are in there, so they need something to eat.

For all intents and purposes, A I Root himself designed that cage over 120 years ago. It hasn't changed or been improved since then. Let me tell you what's not good about this container . . . and hasn't been good for most of those 120 years.

Let's start with the basic construction. The screen edges are cut so that they stick up over the edges. Grab that edge with your bare hands and you've got a problem. For a beginner who hasn't grabbed one of these before it's the scariest moment in beekeeping, because there is always a loose bee or 20 on the outside of the cages when they arrive, and when you get a sharp poke on the hand when



1. Honey-bees are harvested for packages from strong colonies in the spring in the southern and western parts of the US. Bees are 'shaken' from combs into a funnel like device and slid into the top of a package...the cage that holds the bees. When full, an empty feeder can is placed in the hold on the top to contain the bees during the trip back to the warehouse, where a queen and a feeder can will be added.

grabbing a box with live bees crawling around on the outside what's your first thought - screen edge? No, that's not your first thought - your first thought is that you've been stung by about a gazillion bees, right off the bat, even before you begin keeping bees. It's too often not a pretty sight.

The package itself contains over a dozen parts that all have to be put together. Package producers use the argument that their workforce needs something to do during the slow times during the winter. I've got a better idea of what they could be doing - putting new foundation in those frames in the colonies they get the package bees from, that haven't had new foundation in them since the flight of the Hindenburg. Of all the inefficient pieces of bee keeping equipment there are, and there are lots of them, this may be the most inefficient piece there is.

Consider the feeder can. It leaks. Put that package on a truck without good suspension and the bouncing up and down will cause that sugar syrup to drip out. Know what happens when that stuff is running all over the back of a US Post Office delivery truck?



2. Once the cages are filled in the field, the bees are kept inside by inserting an empty feeder can in the feeder can hole on the top. Queen cages are then attached, in this operation using a plastic strap stapled to the top. The next step is putting the queen cage into the mass of bees already in the cage and replacing the empty feeder can with a full one, completing the filling process. Bees, queen, food.

It makes the floor slippery, or sticky, or messy - it makes the delivery people really upset (not to say anything about the loose bees hanging on for dear life to the screen on the cage). And of course an empty feeder can means no feed, and if the bees are destined to be in that cage for more than the two or three days recommended, well, starvation will occur.

Inside, hanging from the top by a (pick one) wire, strip of metal, metal circle, is the queen cage containing a queen, or maybe a queen and attendants. Queen producers don't know which is best, apparently, or don't care, and will put either or both in their cages. It's a proven fact that a queen is better accepted in a colony if she is in the cage alone rather than accompanied by several foreigners, but package producers don't seem to care much one way or the other. By the way, a beginner is supposed to remove those bees from that queen cage without letting the queen fly away in the process. If you've done this a thousand times it's not much of a trick. If you've never done it it's impossible. Guess what happens.

So if you manage to get the feeder can out, and the queen cage out, then you shake, rattle and roll the bees out into your waiting hive. Some people simply put the hive into an empty bottom box with a brood box above with frames and the queen, the theory being

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3. Empty cages/packages waiting to be filled, the scale that they are weighed on, and the wooden slats used to gang the packages together in groups of 5 for easier transport, and full packages already on the truck to be returned to the warehouse.

that the bees will leave the cage and surround the queen. It works unless it gets cold that night and the bees cluster in the cage, and the new queen dies alone, above. Otherwise, after dumping the bees into the box with the frames (remove 4 or 5 first, so there's room), you suspend the cage between two frames using the totally inadequate wire, tab or strap to hang the cage with. If you are suspending this cage between frames that have been drawn out you can't place the oversized cage without damaging the comb. If you are suspending the cage between frames that have not been drawn out (which is what a beginning beekeeper is going to have), you can't place the cage without violating bee space. So, the bees will draw comb out so it neatly hangs between the two frames on either side of the queen cage, anchored, most likely, directly on the queen cage. Then, to remove this ill-placed comb you have to pick up the queen cage with another gazillion bees clinging to it and pull off the comb. It's a mess either way. Then you close it all up and depend on luck and prayer that they make it. Oh, and feed, feed, feed.

What you have, with this type of cage, is a deplorable method of introducing beginning beekeepers to the fine art of beekeeping. The philosophy must be; how can we make it as difficult as possible, so we discourage as many people as possible as soon as possible. That this hasn't changed, or that some package producer hasn't seen the light after all these years is simply a wonder.

Then there's the preparation I mentioned. The people who produce beehives are, perhaps, the most enlightened of all the suppliers in the business, at least here in the States. I can, with little fanfare and not much additional cost, purchase a beehive – that is a screened bottom board, brood chamber and honey supers, inner cover (crownboard) and telescoping or migratory cover, completely assembled, painted and ready to use. I don't buy my automobile in a kit, or my television or rototiller for the garden knocked down, so why shouldn't beehives be ready to use? I've

always wondered about that, and, finally, all my complaining finally got somebody's attention.

But take frames; there's the thorn in the paw of this project. I can buy already-assembled wooden frames with all plastic foundation in place ready to use. Or I can buy one-piece, all plastic frames and foundation, ready to use. Or I can assemble my own frames and put in all plastic foundation. All three of these save me some time and energy compared to the assemble-them-yourself-beeswax-foundation frames you can also purchase. The completely assembled frames are near the top of my list, but the assembled wooden frames with plastic foundation are at the very top for no other reason than I like how they feel in my hands.

But it's the plastic foundation that's the problem here. It's supposed to be already waxed. And, by golly, it is, with the slightest hint of beeswax gracing the surfaces of those plastic sheets that you can imagine. Plainly speaking, they don't put enough wax on those frames to cover the head of a pin. For this purpose, beeswax is measured in nanograms, or probably tenths of a nanogram. To get bees to draw foundation on unwaxed sheets of plastic foundation takes several things. Proper spacing, and more food than you can imagine. For good measure add warm weather, a healthy queen and lots of young bees. To have a beginning beekeeper put a brand new package of bees on unwaxed (because what can be purchased, with the infinitesimal amount of wax on the sheets is, essentially, unwaxed) foundation is asking for trouble. The bees don't mind plastic, but they don't like it very much either. They will adapt to it, however, if there is a healthy honey flow on (or they are being fed lots of heavy sugar syrup), if the frames are spaced in such a way that there is absolutely no room for those aberrant combs to be built between the plastic sheets (see queen cage, above), and if there are no other choices. Or, and this is the kicker, you add more wax.

Add more wax you say? Absolutely! Simply melt some beeswax in your melting pan on



4. Packages filled with bees, food and a queen and ganged into 5's, ready to ship to a beekeeper.



5. The final home for the package bees... a beekeeper installing the bees in their new hive.

the hotplate and brush it on with a sponge paint brush. No problem! Oh, unless that is you don't happen to have enough beeswax to apply to 10 or 20 frames because you didn't happen to have bees last year to get the wax from. Where is a beginning beekeeper going to get at least two pounds of beeswax? Of course the suppliers will sell it to you. Can't you just see the ad in the catalogue - "A beeswax kit for your beeswax coated plastic frames, only \$10.00 – enough to adequately coat 20 frames. Order yours today!" So you can do this if you want; add your own beeswax that is, which is what I did because you can't buy them that way. "Costs too much", say the suppliers. "Beekeepers won't pay that much for an assembled frame if they can instead apply the wax themselves, or just use beeswax foundation".

Well I would pay, and I do pay, every time I buy frames. Assembling frames makes as much sense as assembling the keyboard on your lap top computer. But because the suppliers can't be bothered, I spend a whole afternoon melting beeswax in my garage and brushing it on all the frames I have to get ready for this season's honey flow, today, because the packages have just arrived and as usual, I'm not ready. But instead of simply going out to the bee yard with my pre-assembled hives, my pre-assembled frames and my easy-to-do packages, I'm brushing beeswax on plastic foundation in my poorly lit garage on a beautiful sunny day. What a crazy situation - life could be much easier!