

2026 Stahlman Bee Notes

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When we keep bees, we know they sting, gather honey and require certain management tasks to keep them alive.

But what about our success in managing them? Bee school teaches basic beekeeping, the things one needs to know in order to keep bees. It may be taught that all you need to do to be successful is treat for mites, or follow a guide of when and how to do the things required.

The problem is a little more complicated than that! It often takes a number of failures to really see what keeping bees means. We should learn from failures. Those that don't soon find beekeeping is almost impossible to continue when the bees in their hives die out for the various reasons.



Does your hive have a queen? That is important but that is not the question one should be asking!

All the traits shown by bees in a colony are a reflection of the queen. Successful beekeepers quickly determine the traits they like in a line of queen bees they purchase or raise themselves. The problem facing new beekeepers is they are limited in knowing exactly what they are buying when they depend on package bees or nucs. Often the queen in a package or nuc is not related to the bees in

the box or package cage.

Another question: **Do you see eggs in cells?** Again, this is important. If the queen is not laying eggs, the colony needs intervention by a beekeeper to survive.

The real question is: **What kind of traits do you see in the bees produced from the eggs your queen is laying.** Traits are things you can see or experience by careful observation.

I have worked with a number of what are called races of bees. Many of our colonies are not of a pure race of bees. They are hybrids. Somewhere in their genealogical past, the queen mated with a variety of drones. **There are variations that exist in all our bees.**

The most noticeable trait is the color of the bee.

Color is not the most important thing to consider when keeping bees. Survival is by far the most important trait. I have included several photos of bees here.



The pictures I am sharing here are pictures I have collected over the years. In years past beekeepers swore that certain lines of bees were better than others: Remember Starline, Midnight, Yugo and a host of other lines developed to create better bees. Most if not all those lines have evolved into bees now being produced to be more hygienic. Most bees available are hybrids with a make-up of a vast DNA. Pure breed bees are rare unless they were maintained thru artificial insemination. We still call yellow bees Italian (most popular breed in the U.S.), Carniolan are dark bees and, Caucasian are gray bees. And since 1997 Russians have entered the fray. There may be a bit of the Old German black bee in some of our bees.

Keep in mind that genetic diversity is important for the variation in bee traits.

Let me share what I attribute to my success.

1. **I look for queen failure.** This is easy to determine and when I find a queen not up to the job, I replace her immediately. Bee populations are very important for a colony's survival.
2. Are the bees aggressive! **I do not tolerate mean bees.** What do I mean by mean bees? Any time I open a hive I expect the bees to remain on frames. I don't want bees that run like a flock of sheep and take to the air and attack like kamikazes (*in World War II a Japanese aircraft loaded with explosives and making a deliberate suicidal crash on an enemy target*).
3. I expect the colony to build up early in the spring as bee populations grow. This is key to the rest of the year. Management early in the year is to prevent swarming and building up colonies for honey harvest time.
4. Disease and pest resistance. I look for any sign that indicates the bees in the colony are not hygienic. **Action by me** is required if I see anything that indicates a problem.
5. I judge colonies on their ability to gather pollen and honey. Not all colonies are equal at this. Poorly performing colonies are requeened. There are always a few colonies that

stand out . A new queen doesn't immediately change anything. It takes time for eggs to become adult worker bees while the old bee population continues to exist.

6. I also know that some colonies are very good at building new comb while others do not. I like to keep those queens that produce bees that build comb.
7. I find that a colony being robbed is an indication that I did not observe problems earlier. It is my fault in bee management. Any frames destroyed by wax moth also indicate a lack of hive management with proper inspections. This is not the fault of the bees.
8. I mark all my queens. This helps me determine if a queen is superseded. Finding an unmarked queen means that colony is on my watch closely list.
9. I use standard equipment, everything interchangeable.
10. When I have determined that a colony has proven that it is capable of survival, I feed it well going into winter. I take my losses in the fall and move resources from weak hives to strong hives.
11. I raise queens for myself from proven lines of bee stock. I do not sell queens as I once did. I would encourage all of you to do the same. When you find a colony doing a good job, the queen in that colony is special. That queen represents queen stock you seek for the future. **Queens (even the best) do not live long. (2 to 4 years is normal.)**
12. I record important information about each hive. This varies from inspection to inspection but if something is important, I place a brick on the top cover to take care of in a day or so.
13. I have colonies close at hand and I take frequent walks in my apiary to check hive



entrances. I use my camera as an extra set of eyes. I can take a picture of a group of bees on a frame or at the hive entrance for example and enlarge the photo so I can check for mites on bees. It is not a good way to do a mite count

but mites certainly can be seen if they are on bees in the photo.



14. Check the activity of bees flying in front of the hive entrance. Bee traffic should be observed. Some bees are leaving and some are returning with pollen on their legs. Sometimes one can see a lot of activity such as seen in this photo. This lasts for 10 to 15 minutes at most. It is not a swarm and the hive is not being robbed.

This is a normal event. The bees are taking orientation flights often mistaken for robbing. When a colony is being robbed, the sound should alert you to the frenzied behavior of individual bees. The frenzied flight into and out of the hive with masses of bees crowding each other at the entrance is quite a different contrast to the young bees taking their first flights.

15. Comb management. I try to change out frames after 5 years. With pollution in the air combined with bees returning to colonies with pollen contaminated with the chemicals, it doesn't take long before a colony has comb that is not very healthy. Old comb filled with pollen is extremely likely to cause more harm than being helpful to a colony of bees.



Even comb with available cells should be replaced. The frames in this hive body were at least 20 years old. It is best to put frames like this in a wax melter.



And Burr comb on plastic foundation like this should be removed and the plastic foundation rewaxed to be used again. Note the difference in the top bars of these two photos – one looking fairly new and one stained and dark from age. Help bees keep comb in good shape and productive. Old comb and bad comb are time bombs because they contribute to diseases and pests. Any time bad comb occupies the brood chamber; it reduces the number of cells available for a queen to lay eggs. This is a waste of space and may contribute to early swarming.

Let me add that every beekeeper has the right to keep bees in almost any fashion that they find good for them. I do not want to over simplify beekeeping techniques and I always am aware that there are exceptions to rules. But these are rules that apply to my way of keeping bees. If they are of a help to you, I am glad to provide this list.

I expect to get some feedback on killing queens. At one time, I just pinched them and tossed them aside to the ground. In recent years, I put them in queen cages which are put into my refrigerator. I have dead queens to show friends and new beekeepers what a queen looks like. In fact, a neighbor boy has a collection of insects. He asked me for a drone honey bee and I said, do you want a queen as well. He replied, "really!" Yes, really.