

2026 Stahlman Bee Notes

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Spring -- Bring it On! Swarms are being reported here in Raleigh.



How about a swarm in the top of this pine tree?

Swarming has always been an important spring event. A newly caught swarm contains most of the field bees of the age to gather nectar and pollen. They will require room at once to store honey they gather. Many beekeepers are surprised to see how quickly these bees build new comb. Comb is needed for both eggs the queen lays and food storage. Almost immediately cell building becomes the most immediate task at hand.

The bees left behind in the old hive usually have a surplus of food and are required to look after the brood while a brood break will last a few weeks. The new virgin queen must mate and mature during a short period of time before egg laying begins. This is an important issue when it comes to management techniques used to control varroa mites. The lack of new developing brood stops the reproduction cycle of the varroa mite. While many beekeepers will consider swarming a real problem, many are using the brood break as a biological control to reduce mite populations.

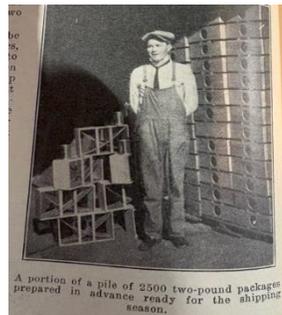
The major problem with swarming is it reduces the amount of honey harvested. An old saying is: "The more swarms, the less honey." Beekeepers keeping bees for honey production do what I call "a balancing act." Adding boxes to keep bees from swarming has been a long-established management tool. There are many factors contributing to the swarming behavior of honey bees. The major one is called a "constricted brood nest." In plain language it means the worker bees have filled all cells present with honey, pollen, or eggs. The Italian race is more prone to swarm because of an early build-up in bee populations but don't kid yourself, bees will swarm under the right conditions.

I would like to direct my readers to an article published in the March 2026 issue of the American Bee Journal written by Shelley Stuart. It is titled "***Producing Swarm Queens for Fun, Profit and Really Big Queens.***" Most beekeepers seek information about why colonies swarm. I could rehash what I have written in the past, but this article really breaks down a complex

topic into a very readable subject with more Parts to follow. As I indicated, beekeeping information gets updated and more scientific and this issue hit “home.” I am looking for Part II coming up in the April issue. One other publication that should be in every beekeeping library is the latest issue of “*The Beekeeper’s Handbook 5th Ed*” by Diana Sammataro and Alphonse Avitabile. It is my go-to reference book if I don’t know an answer to a beekeeping question.



This section is for those that buy package bees. Starting beekeeping by buying a package of bees has been a standard practice for over 100 years.



This is a photo from an April 1926 Gleanings In Bee Culture Magazine. It shows package bees in cages ready to be shipped north.

Old wood cages are being replaced by plastic cages but many bee packages are still transported just like this picture shows. The complaints from buyers have not changed much. New beekeepers have little idea of what they are buying – just bees! They are needed to start new hives. There are problems unseen by most who buy packages of bees – often sold today as #2 packages or #3 packages. The reason for the shift from pounds to # is the exact weight of the bees in the package are not exactly 2 or 3 pounds of bees. When the demand for package bees developed – due to the introduction of tracheal and Varroa mites – those producing package bees began to reduce the number of bees in the package. States with accurate weight laws began to investigate the label given to package bees. The bee industry changed to the hash tag # to describe the size of the package being sold to avoid legal weight laws. Previously, a three-pound package of bees was usually considered to be a package with about 12,000 bees in it. I did an internet search for a pound of bees? I got this response:

Copilot Search



A pound of bees typically contains approximately 3,000 to 5,000 bees. More specifically:

- About 3,000 to 4,000 bees are estimated to be in a pound. ↻ 1
 - Some sources suggest around 3,600 bees per pound. ↻ 1
 - A common estimate is 3,000 to 5,000 worker bees in a pound. ↻ 1
- These estimates can vary slightly depending on the specific type of bee and their size.



A good way to determine how many bees one gets in a package is to weigh the package. The weight of packages will vary according to the amount of syrup in the syrup can, the weight of the wood and screen wire and the bees in the package.

After installing the bees in a hive, one could put the box, and syrup can on a scale. The difference in weight would be the weight of the bees. If the weight of the bees is less than three pounds then the package producer is not really selling a three-pound package of bees but the Hash tag # makes it okay.

Comments made by Morley Pettit, a Georgia producer of package bees:

1. Northern buyers have learned to be very insistent as to early shipping dates, and if the southern breeder chances to have bad weather for queen-rearing when the queens have to be reared he is up against it good and hard. He knows that if packages do not start north on schedule he will not need a radio to hear the customer "holler." Unless he is strictly scrupulous as to quality he will let "mother" (the queen) take a trip north when the "daughter" is not ready to go, or he will let inferior queens get by that he would reject at any other time.
2. There is a great difference in queens and in bees, and no grading standards have been established.
3. There is a chance the northern buyer stands a better chance of getting good queens after the package season is over.
4. Packages are simply put together and shipped. The buyer knows at once the condition of the queen shipped -- if she is dead in the queen cage, the buyer is entitled to a new queen replacement. The buyer has the responsibility of a successful introduction and is responsible for management of the hive.
5. As a producer of package bees, other concerns affect the packages once they leave his place. He says, "After that it is up to the Express companies to expedite transportation to the customer."

Let me bring you up-to-date

1. The problems suggested above and written about in 1926 are much the same in 2026. The urge to make money is still strong and even if the hype is there, quality is still an issue.
2. Those selling bees ask for money up-front. Often they have little knowledge of the bees you buy from them. They didn't make up the packages. The producers of package bees face a number of issues – labor to get bees into packages on schedule, weather mating conditions for good queens, and transportation of bees when they leave the south to the customer.
3. There is still no standard – a buyer- beware- of what you get exists. In fact, when you buy a package today, you get not only bees of unknown quality (many come from hives shipped east from California pollination bees) but they also contain varroa mites.

4. Many who buy bees in the early spring do not get well-mated queens. Often a package may have the old queen (plus the new cage queen) which results in the caged queen being killed on introduction. No one selling bees in packages will guarantee that the package will not in a few months go into rapid decline and fail. Thus, beekeepers must manage package bees for varroa mites just as soon as they are hived.
5. I have heard over and over again of a beekeeper complaining that the bees just left the hive. The term we use is abscond from the hive. It is not uncommon for bees just to abandon a hive for no reason at all. It is not rare to have a package bee population leave a new hive even before the caged queen is released from her cage, especially when installed on new undrawn foundation. The old queen might have accidentally been included with the bee population and the bees reject the hive so they abscond. It is not unusual to find the caged queen still alive in the empty hive.
6. Finally, many of the bees sold in packages are older bees. The bees are taken from honey supers rather than brood frames. The queen and brood of those colonies are managed with queen excluders to prevent queens from moving up into the supers. Young bees will be found tending to the brood below the queen excluder.
7. It seems as if aggressive bees are becoming more common than in the past because queens are raised in areas with hybrid Africanized drones.

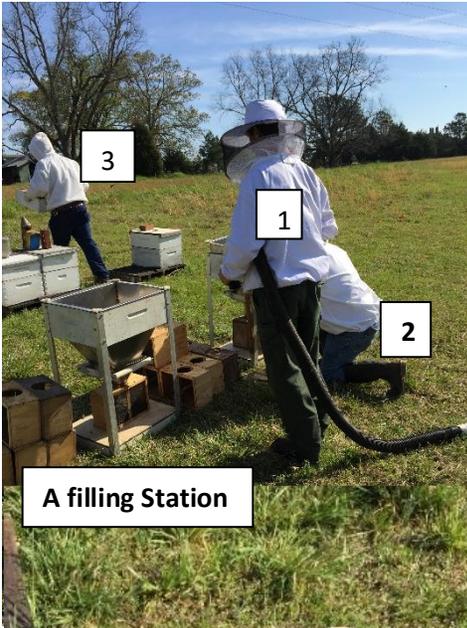
Things happen during transit – bees can get over heated or in some cases chilled. Rough roads and spilled syrup can mess up bees. Any package with a layer of dead bees at the bottom of the cage should be rejected by those buying the packages. Bees must be kept in cool places and installed in hives as quickly as possible. And then there are other problems:

- Queens as mentioned above may be poorly mated and fail to build up colony populations.
- The bees might be extremely aggressive. The bees in the package are not related to the queens in the package. Bee behavior is based on the future bees produced by the queen. It may take more than a month before the bees produced by the queen can be evaluated as good worker bees.
- It is common to find varroa mites on the bees in a package – do a sugar roll test almost immediately after receiving a package of bees. A few small hive beetles may show up as well. Share with the person who sold you the package immediately if some mites or SHB are found in the packages. Also notify the state apiary inspectors in your state if the seller doesn't react to the fact -- that the mite population in the package is of concern to you.
- One other thought, nucs are often recommended because they have a laying queen, brood, and a good start. This can be measured easily by the number of frames with brood, the temperament of the bees, and the bee population. A lot of poor nucs are sold and knowing something about what is a good nuc should be important. **Bees should cover all frames in a 5 frame nuc – not just three frames in the middle of the**

nuc. Frames should not be old and black nor should the comb be dark and contain old drone brood cells.

- In human terms, a package of bees is like bringing a baby home from the hospital. One must let the baby learn to walk. A Nuc on the other hand, is like adopting a teenager. It can run and talk back at you.

I can share this information with you because at one time I was one of those people who took bees out of my hives to make money. It was good money. But the truth of the matter, we could not guarantee our packages even though we had a state certificate indicating that our bees were inspected and found disease free. Inspectors were looking for American foulbrood, and colonies passed inspection even if inspectors found varroa mites. A bee yard with just one colony with AFB would result in the entire yard of bees condemned and no bees or hives from that yard could be moved. When the mite issue came up – the mites got a pass to be sold in the U.S. but not to Canada. Canada closed their borders to U.S. package bees.



A good strong colony of bees can produce several pounds (2 to 3 pounds) of bees every two weeks. It is a major money source for those beekeepers involved in that business. Modern shaking is more like blowing bees from supers full of bees into cages. It is fast and bees from various colonies are often mixed.

This is called a filling station! This station has two funnels. [1] One beekeeper controls a nozzle to blow honeybees out of supers brought to him. [2] One person is responsible to move and remove cages under the funnels. [3] Another has the job to remove the empty super from the funnel to return it back to its hive. At the same time others are at work bringing supers to the funnels.

This is fast paced work.



It begins with a super filled with bees.



It takes a crew of individuals all doing a specific thing

The final step includes placing a caged queen into a screened package followed by the syrup can and a lid stapled in place.



From here it is only a few hours before the packages are picked up by someone and shipped to customers.

