

# Beekeeping Basics

## Beekeeping Classes:

### Far from one-and-done

by GRANT F. C. GILLARD



I think about the advice we give people who want to start keeping honey bees. The most common suggestion that's affordable with a low threshold of entry is the recommendation to take a class on beginning beekeeping. But I wonder if we give the impression that a class is a single event, a box to check off, or perhaps a mere stepping stone toward something more concrete.

Even so, particularly from my own experience, I've come to the conclusion that one class is simply not sufficient to prepare a person to get started in beekeeping. On second thought, one class may be perfectly fine to get someone started, but beyond that, an initial class is woefully inadequate to wrestle the variables that possess the

potential to derail a well-intentioned entry into beekeeping.

So, what's my advice for February? Find a beginner's class and sign up. Even if you already took a class, take it again. Even if you've been keeping bees for a couple of seasons and feel you've got a good sense of how your colonies are progressing, take another class.

I'm sure what you'll find is the vast majority of classes, particularly at the local level, cater to brand-new beekeepers with no experience and offer the tips and tricks of setting up a backyard beehive. Don't let this simplicity deter you or insult your intelligence. I feel confident you didn't learn everything there was to learn in your first class, just as I'm equally convinced

the instructor didn't teach everything that needed to be taught. Most aspiring beekeepers come to a class with a thirst for knowledge and we provide so much information it's like drinking from a fire hose.

#### WHAT TEACHING TAUGHT ME

Admittedly, there was a time when I thought teaching a single class on beginning beekeeping was enough to provide the basics to get someone started. Then I had a unique experience that opened my eyes and blew my mind to the benefits of taking a second or third beginning beekeeping class.

A few years ago, I taught a class at the Cape Girardeau Career and Technology Center. Attendance was small, about a dozen folks, so we had a lot of great interaction, time for in-depth discussions and plenty of opportunities for questions. At the end of the last class, the administrator from the school asked me to hand out a standard evaluation form. It was pretty general and rather vague, but the administration needed it for planning future classes.

When I collected those forms, I told the students, "That form was mandated by the administration, but let me ask you for your thoughts on what we've been talking about the last few weeks. Have I covered the material you felt you needed to get started? Is there something you hoped I would have covered, but didn't?"

There was that moment of awkward silence, probably more awkward for me than for them. Some of the students shuffled their feet like they'd really rather be somewhere else. I was about to let them go and call it a night when one of the students looked at me and said, "Mr.



*Beginning beekeepers benefit from classes where they can see bees up close. These students were meeting bees for the first time at Heartland Apiculture Society's July 2018 annual conference in St. Louis, taught by University of Minnesota's Bee Squad.*



David Draker, left, and Tom Miller, of Rolla Bee Club in Rolla, Missouri, both started beekeeping by taking beginning classes. Tom took a first class, then volunteered to help with subsequent classes, noting every time he took a class he learned something new. Even now as an instructor Tom says he leaves with new information.

Gillard, this was the best beekeeping class I've ever taken. I think you're an excellent teacher."

I had to wonder just how many beekeeping classes this fellow signed up for. Then he added, "Last spring, I told my wife what I wanted to do, you know, get a hive of bees. The only way she'd agree to it was if I took a class because she knew I didn't know anything about keeping bees, and she was right. So last spring I signed up for a course at the university. I had no clue what they were talking about, but this was what my wife thought I needed and so I took the class. When I finished the class, I bought two sets of boxes, just like everyone says, and my bees came in the mail. I was so lost. The bees never really did much through the summer. The first hive died on Labor Day weekend and the second hive was dead at Thanksgiving time. I wanted to order another set of bees this spring, but my wife said I needed to take another course. Your class was the only course I could find and I'm glad I found it. You made everything perfectly clear."

I thanked him, though in my mind, I'm not sure I deserved such lofty praise. On the way home, I pondered his effusive comments and I figured out where he was coming from. The information in the first class was so new and unfamiliar he didn't have a relevant slot on his apicultural bookshelf to file that knowledge. Then he spent a futile summer working with his bees. For whatever reason, the col-

onies died, which is not uncommon in those initial years.

Though he didn't recognize it, he entered the second class with a foundation built on his familiarity with the bees. The terminology and vocabulary we used now had meaning. He had a point of reference when we discussed ways to encourage the bees to draw out comb. He understood the value of the drones. On the surface, his first year in the bee yard could be summed up as a total failure. However, he gleaned a basic level of comprehension that brought clarity to the second class. This clarity was missing from the first class because he didn't have the experience. I've come to wonder why we don't recommend new beekeepers take additional classes.

#### BEGINNER CLASSES ARE FOR EVERYONE

Beekeepers new to this fascinating hobby often share this sentiment: "I've been keeping bees for three years and I don't know what I'm doing, or even what I'm supposed to be doing." The feeling is surprisingly common. I typically respond by suggesting they sign up for a beginning beekeeping class. Their reply is often, "I already took one."

My comeback is, "That's good. Sign up for another one."

The momentary silence between us conveys a sharp decline in their previously lofty estimation of my beekeeping status. Then I usually gently add, "Beekeeping is relatively simple when you understand the basic prin-

ciples. Grasping those basic principles is often overlooked in our excitement of getting our first hives and installing our bees. I'd venture a guess there's a lot of material taught in that beginning class you didn't really understand, and this is pretty normal. Even if you did master every aspect of the class, a basic review or brush-up in a second class strengthens what was previously learned."

Sometimes I receive a shrug of indifference. Sometimes I get the reluctant concession of, "Well, probably won't help but I guess it can't hurt."

I attended a gathering of non-beekeeping people where the host introduced me as a beekeeper. During a break in the meeting, an older gentleman approached me and shared how his wife started two hives of honey bees in their backyard. I responded enthusiastically, "That's good. I trust she's doing well."

He shrugged and added, "Nope. She lost both colonies the first year and the bees we bought the next season also died. I think she needs to take some classes or something."

Two things immediately struck me. The first thing was his subtle aggravation with his wife's lack of success, as if beekeeping was an easy venture. No matter the experience, beekeeping is a hobby with few apparent solutions that fix the most vexing issues. Success is far from guaranteed, and to those who haven't tried it, beekeeping certainly looks uncomplicated.

The second thing that struck me was his awareness how taking a class might provide the resources his wife needed to scale the learning curve. He presumed, correctly, there are classes for those who want to learn beekeeping.

Would taking a class solve his wife's problems? Maybe; maybe not. The husband didn't offer any further explanation so I simply nodded, handed him a business card and added, "If I can be of help, tell your wife she's free to give me a call." She never did, but some beekeepers feel a little awkward asking for help when things don't work out, and after two exasperating seasons, she may have simply given up.

It also surprises me how many people don't know these classes exist, or maybe they think a class is unnecessary. Perhaps they presume beekeeping is pretty straightforward and they'll figure things out along the way. Sometimes I hear the complaint how they took a class but it

made no sense or didn't fully teach them how to keep bees. I'm not sure that's what a beginner class is supposed to do.

When beekeepers ask me for advice regarding their lack of success, I confess my initial counsel is fairly standard and relatively simple. I recommend a four-part approach, suggesting beekeepers take a class, join a local bee club, find a like-minded mentor, and subscribe to the two magazines dedicated solely to the craft of keeping honey bees. This formula is not the exclusive path to becoming a seasoned beekeeper, but it lays down the foundation for a lifetime of continual learning in order to address the ever-changing landscape of keeping honey bees.

Of my four suggestions, taking a class is the most significant factor, but not to the exclusion of the other three. However, I think it's the best place to start. When someone asks me about starting a couple of hives in the backyard, my first recommendation is always to sign up for a class. When an existing beekeeper begins to bog down in the complexities of the second and third years, my immediate thought is to ask if they took a class and to recommend another beginner class if they had.

Are classes required? Nope.

Recommended? Absolutely.

The single key to long-term success? Probably not, but it's one of those components that provides traction so you can move forward instead of spinning your wheels wondering if your colonies are doing well or why they aren't. Taking a class is an important step in becoming a confident beekeeper, but over the years I've arrived at the conclusion that taking several beginning classes is even better.

I confess my suggestion doesn't win many popularity contests. Too many beekeepers still abide by the idea that a class is a one-time event and taking it again is simply unnecessary. Or as one beekeeper retorted, "I already know how to install a package."

#### IS THERE AN IDEAL CLASS?

So what makes for a good beginner class? First, let's acknowledge the assessment that a beginner class is, at best, a rather superficial, introductory overview covering the basics. The time constraints alone cannot possibly cover all the options. A productive beginner class should also highlight the necessity of participating in a local bee club where one's educational



*Rolla Bee Club co-founder Charlotte Ekker Wiggins reminds beginning beekeepers that class instructors are coaches. The real teachers are the bees.*

journey continues to evolve. Most beginner classes are limited to what beekeeping entails and what is needed to get started.

Second, I like to start my classes by lowering the threshold of expectations. I'm not expecting everyone to become a beekeeper. A successful class may help a person recognize this hobby is not a good fit for their personality or present circumstances. In every class I've taught, I've met a couple of students who shared how they always had an interest in keeping bees but because they lived in a municipality that restricts keeping bees, they wanted to explore their options for that mythical "someday" when they could afford a small acreage in the country. It's a good thing to have those "someday" dreams.

Third, every instructor brings their experience and knowledge which they share through their personal perspective. I share my experience as to how I do things, why I manage my bees a certain way, and how I go about getting things done. However, I also try and make it clear there are countless ways to keep bees depending upon one's purpose and level of commitment. My primary purpose is to make honey, which may not be the immediate goal of new beekeepers. Likewise, I run around a hundred colonies, which I share in the opening moments of my classes, not to brag, but to inform the students I'm coming from a specific point of reference that's undoubtedly unfamiliar to a

new beekeeper's experience.

Fourth, a beginning class should be taught with a heavy emphasis on honey bee biology: why the bees behave the way they do, and what the bees need from us to live in these artificial homes we provide for them. If there is such a thing as an imaginary breakdown of content, I'd like to see 75% taught on honey bee biology, maybe 15% on the various equipment options available to us, and 10% on how we integrate the bees into these human contraptions.

Over the years, I have come to five opinions on taking a beginner's class.

#### THE MORE THE MERRIER

First, take several classes, ideally from different organizations and different instructors. While some of the content will be redundant, the repetition reinforces key principles. Even if you were to take the same course from the same instructor, I guarantee the same information will be heard differently based on your experience.

If you have trouble finding classes, the best place to search is your state association's website. You'll likely find a link to a local beekeeping association where you can inquire about classes. If you subscribe to American Bee Journal, you'll find a listing of upcoming classes in the "News and Events" section.

Take note: The months of January, February and March offer the greatest availability for classes. Once we get into April, those options begin to dis-

appear. By the time summer arrives classes are non-existent, though I've personally tutored a handful of people who didn't get their equipment until well into June.

#### NOT ALL CLASSES ARE CREATED EQUAL

I think this statement is self-evident, in part because no class can possibly teach everything there is to know on keeping honey bees. Some classes are split up over the course of three weeks while some classes are all-day affairs on a cold Saturday in February. Either way, time is a constraint and some classes will emphasize specific aspects or provide selected information that someone thinks is more important to your education.

Charlotte Wiggins, a certified instructor through the Great Plains Master Beekeeping Program and founder of the Rolla Bee Club in Rolla, Missouri, recommends looking for scientifically-based, best practices-based beekeeping education. She states that all of the Rolla Bee Club classes have been certified by the Great Plains Master Beekeeping Program. The program is focused on "providing beekeepers with a solid beekeeping education foundation."

Classes are becoming more standardized. Still, what is typically taught is contingent upon who is teaching, what experiences they bring, and what they perceive the students need out of the course content.

#### DIFFERENT TEACHERS TEACH DIFFERENTLY

It's not surprising that different instructors come to the classroom with different biases and varying opinions, and some can be a little dogmatic regarding what works for them. These methods may not be the way you want to keep your bees. Don't let this throw you off track. Don't be offended if a particular teacher sounds dismissive of your questions. Don't be surprised if the novel method taking the internet by storm is not covered, or even mentioned.

Teachers communicate in different ways and students learn through different modalities. Even in my own experience attending lectures and workshops, I find I resonate with certain speakers more than others. Some lecturers are easier to listen to, even during that dreaded time slot right after lunch. I also commiserate with instructors who are more comfortable sharing in small groups than standing on a stage in a large auditorium with a balky PowerPoint presentation.

Cory Stevens from Dexter, Missouri, is a leading authority teaching queen breeding and rearing. His recommendation for finding a good class is focused on the instructor, and he says: "The best teachers of classes may not necessarily be the ones who have kept bees the longest or keep the most hives, but rather those who are most passionate/obsessive about beekeeping and can openly communicate their experiences. The best teachers are active participants with the bees in the apiary, not just reading everything they can on their computer. They aren't afraid to test out what everyone is talking about, and have something worth sharing to help others become better beekeepers."

#### AMPLE OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND

The opportunities to learn are all around us. Most classes and workshops cost money and involve traveling expenses, but I counter the money is well spent when compared to the cost of replacement bees because you weren't sure what you were doing.

While I love the fellowship and interaction of attending a live workshop, technology has enhanced our opportunities to learn. Particular to our experiences with the current pandemic, computerized group meetings, aka Zoom technology, allow safe and affordable options you can attend without leaving home or dressing appropriately. YouTube videos, especially the TED Talks, offer convenience, and if you're like me, I love the option to pause the video to capture a salient point. I'm also grateful for the Closed Captioning option so I can see what I'm hearing. Lately, I've come to appreciate the videos produced by Tennessee beekeeper Kamon Reynolds. I like his easy style of delivery.

As summer approaches, many bee clubs have, in the past, offered field days giving hands-on experience and live observations. Given our current restrictions, we'll see how this works out in the coming season.

#### JOIN A LOCAL BEE CLUB

If you still think taking a remedial beginning beekeeping course is going to be a waste of your time, here's a better solution: Volunteer with your local bee club and help the experienced beekeepers who teach these courses. Every Pat Sajak needs a Vanna White. You'll benefit from hearing the presentations, as it reinforces your own learning and you might accidentally learn something new. This suggestion comes from Charlotte Wiggins. She says, "It is not uncommon to pick up a new tip, or be reminded of something, as I listen to other instructors make their presentations."

#### A FINAL PARTING SHOT

Every year brings a new challenge and forces me to rethink how I manage my hives. I have come to accept the reality that the education of a seasoned beekeeper never ends. The best beekeepers and those who find the greatest enjoyment working their hives are those who continue to grow in their skills and knowledge, no matter how many hives they tend or how long they've been at this hobby.

Grant Gillard is a beekeeper now living in Holden, Missouri. He speaks at a number of conferences around the country and is the author of "Nicot Queen Rearing: The Non-Grafting Method for Raising Local Queens," available with his other books on amazon.com. You can contact him at [grantfgillard@gmail.com](mailto:grantfgillard@gmail.com) or find him on Facebook.



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