

# Stahlman beekeeping notes for 2021

## Issue # 9 February 28 Looking forward to Spring

The first full day of spring is the 20<sup>th</sup>.

At the spring equinox the days and nights are approximately twelve hours long. It is a period of shifting weather between winter and summer. Often drastic temperature changes occur.

Most of you receiving package bees will see them arriving the middle of this month (March) thru (April).

I would like to put some caution into your day about planning for beekeeping activities. Over the many years I have kept bees, one pattern seems to happen. We get good weather in early March and then cold seems to return. For new beekeepers getting ready for an early start, let me say, it could be one of the biggest mistakes one can make. I have seen snow when apple trees begin to bloom! There is little or nothing that we can do to overcome the issues involved with a winter storm. Look at Texas this past week. Normal temperature the last week of February was 50 degrees or more above the actual temperatures that froze pipes, shut down the electrical system, highways, and resulted in a number of deaths. If one tries to start bees just before a weather event like that [install bees in hives without drawn comb, and expect them to survive] – be ready for the disappointment to discover that bees die.

Thus, if buying package bees in March be prepared for bad weather even if it does not arrive.

At one time I raised and sold bees in packages. I worked in southern Georgia where the weather and climate was warm. Once in a while, a cold freeze would blow down from the North all the way into Florida. A person making a living selling bees tries to follow a schedule and takes orders from beekeepers far in advance of actually putting bees in packages. This includes raising queens that go into those packages.

In the bee business, once bees are shook/placed into a box and given a queen and a can of syrup, the clock for their survival begins. **They have no shelf life!** They can survive as long as they have food and are well managed for a very short period of time.

The person selling package bees has control over a few things involved in the sale of those packages.

1. The scheduled date the bees are to be picked up in a southern bee yard. These arrangements are generally made a year ahead.
2. The method of transporting the packages to the customer.
3. The method of distribution of the packages.
4. The price to be charged for packages.

The person or company providing the bees for the packages.

1. Should have an inspection report concerning the inspection of the hive the bees are taken from. This information is provided to the person picking up bees for example in a Georgia bee yard. The state of Georgia does issue a certificate to those selling bees.
2. North Carolina does as well. Rules regarding the purchase of bees – packages, queens, and bees on comb vary from state to state.
3. Generally, bees shipped in package are considered disease free. They should be treated for varroa and possible virus that are spread thru the distribution of bees.
4. The company selling package bees has an obligation to provide honest information regarding where the bees in the packages are from. For example, at the end of the Almond pollination period, a number of hives in California are shipped back east. These hives are full of stressed bees. Think a three-day trip on a semi-truck load of hives set off the truck to be shook into package bees almost immediately.
5. Check on the reputation of the Company your package supplier is buying packages from! The local seller of packages should be able to provide the answer to that question. You have a right to know!

**What the person selling packages picked up and bought in a southern bee yard (Package supplier) does not have control over!**

1. When picked up at a southern bee yard, the general comment by those sellers is: When you drive out the lane the bees are yours. If anything happens during the trip to the north, the person buying packages for resale is responsible.

I can give you a number of ideas as to what can happen.

A person trying for the first time to haul a load of package bees (usually an inexperienced beekeeper) faces challenges. But these challenges are faced by all individuals who haul bees.

1. Weather conditions – It could be very hot and this is very hard on the bees in the packages. Bees clustered in the packages can handle cold much better than hot.
2. Exposure to wind blowing into the packages loaded especially in exposed locations on load.
3. Bumpy road conditions. This not only dislodges bees inside the package but causes loss of syrup in the feeder can inside the package.
4. Traffic slow moving. Bees require ventilation and if confined in a covered trailer for example, die quickly. [I remember a situation in which a beekeeper who took orders and deposits from customers picked up a load of 200 packages loaded into a U-haul trailer, drove out of a bee yard in southern Georgia and by the time he got to Atlanta, all his bees in the trailer were dead.]
5. Failure of customers who buy package bees to pick them up on the delivery date! This is one reason many require a deposit when they take orders.

### **As the Customer buying a package of bees:**

If you have a scheduled pick-up date: Understand the information above.

### **Weather determines work conditions in the bee yard.**

**Commercial beekeepers do not work in cold weather** – not because they can't but because the harm caused to the bees. No one has control over the weather and it is common for those who take orders for package bees to notify their customer that adjustments need to be made before the bees can be shook into packages.

**As I have indicated Package bees have a very narrow shelf life.** If the vendor selling package bees picks them up and has them ready for distribution – you are responsible for picking them up on the scheduled date. It doesn't make any difference if it is raining, gets cold, or you have other things to do!

### **What you should expect when the package is delivered to you!**

**You should get what you pay for!** A package of live bees and a queen. The can of syrup should be nearly full. There may be a scattering of dead bees on the floor of the cage. That is normal.



**This is a good # 3 package of bees.**

Note: there's almost no dead bees on the floor of this package.

It looks like there are a lot of bees in this package. This is because the bees in the cluster have expanded due to being warm.

There are about 10,000 bees in a #3 package. A pound of bees contains approximately 3,500 bees.

#### **Problems you may encounter which is a reason for rejecting the bee order!**

- 1. Dead bees in the bottom of the cage – If you cannot see the floor of the cage because it is covered with dead bees, it is the vendors responsibility to deliver live bees. Don't pay for dead bees. Negotiate with the seller on a fair price.**
- 2. The bee cluster looks small – Check the center wood vertical bar shown above. A normal cluster will be gathered around the can and queen in the cage and take up about 1/3 to 1/2 of the space in the cage. In cold conditions this cluster will be located in the center of the cage and be a bit smaller than the photo shows.**
- 3. Bees in the cage running frantically around making a loud buzzing noise. This is a bad sign of extreme stress on the bees in the package. Poor handling by the vendor. Could result in earlier death of honey bees put into a hive.**
- 4. Another situation that rarely happens: The can in the cage is not placed in the cage so the pin holes in the can release the syrup in the can. Result dead bees.**

#### **Taking care of your package once you have accepted it**

- 1. You should have all bee equipment built and ready for honey bees before you pick up a package or a nuc.**
2. Once you get the package home and wait to install the bees in a hive, make sure you keep the bees in shade and spray a water mist on them if they are making a lot of noise. A thin mixture of sugar and water brushed on the screen of the cage will also calm the bees. It is important that you do not get the bees wet.
3. I like to recommend that honey bees be installed into a hive in late afternoon. If done earlier in the day bees sometimes drift or abscond (leave the hive).

4. Sometimes it is not possible to install them earlier and most of the time, it works out well. BUT, I like to avoid problems for new beekeepers.
5. Bees need food. The syrup in the can was there to help the bees get to your hive. You need a feeder.

**The selection of a method to introduce a package of bees to a hive needs to be made.**

Removing the syrup can should not be too difficult. One method is to slide it out of the cage by turning the cage up side down. Make sure you are prepared for the can to slide out quickly. As the syrup can is being removed prepare to notice that a wire or a thin strip of metal is attached to the queen cage. The queen cage should be removed and the syrup can then be replaced in the package. If it goes well not many bees will be released from the package.

There are several methods one can use to release the bees. **But before the bees are released from the cage, one must check to make sure the queen is alive in the queen cage!**

**If the queen is dead (not moving in the queen cage) call your package provider and ask immediately for a replacement queen.** There should be no issue with the package provider about replacing the queen at no charge. If the queen should die after the bees and queen are put into a hive, the package provider is not responsible for the possibility of the queen not being accepted by the bees. This is usually a management issue because mistakes are made [queen released too early] and issues such as killing the queen by removing frames to find her.

One good experiment a new beekeeper might do to increase knowledge in beekeeping is to buy both a package of bees and a nuc. A nuc is a small hive of generally five frames with bees and a queen. The frames are taken from the nuc and placed into a hive body. They have the advantage of already accepting the queen, have capped brood, some honey stores and pollen in drawn comb.



**Visually this is what a package and nuc look like prior to being put into hives.**

**Next week I will show photographs of bees in packages being introduced into hives and tips on what a good nuc hive should look like.**

**I strongly believe that a good nuc supplier is harder to find than a good package supplier. Packages are produced in large numbers by a selected group of suppliers. Nuc's are produced locally.**

**Good reliable suppliers take care of their customers. If you have a queen problem and the supplier fails to address the problem, you have the choice of never buying from that supplier again.**

**When I buy bees I always want to know if they have been inspected, and if I am buying packages (I want to know the state of origin and the kind of queen I am getting). It is best if the queens are marked!**

**If I am buying nuc hives (I want to know the condition of the comb –[ Is it fairly new or is it old]? I want to know if the queen is the one that laid the eggs and is the mother of the bees in the nuc or was she added to frames and bees taken from other hives. How many frames in the nuc have brood on them? Can I inspect the nuc before I take it home!**

**Nest week we will look at examples of how packages can be installed into equipment and some of the problems one might face just starting a new hive. Also included will be how someone with drawn comb and a hive or two can give a boost to a new package of bees.**

**Feeding bees at this time of year is important. One page in next week's issue will cover feeding bees.**