



Animal &  
Plant Health  
Agency

## National Bee Unit

Best practice guideline No. 8

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# *Guidance for the purchase and sale of nucleus colonies*

**Honey bees nucleus colonies consist of five to six brood frames with an ample adult honey bee population, at least three frames of brood in all stages, stores of nectar and pollen and a healthy queen. This best practice guideline provides advice on checks to be performed by prospective buyers of nucleus colonies and the recommended best practices for suppliers.**

### **The nucleus colony**

- A nucleus colony, often referred to as a 'nuc', is a small colony of bees. It usually contains five or six brood combs and a good population of adult bees, pollen, nectar, healthy brood in all stages and a laying queen.
- Nucleus colonies are purchased in small boxes, which may be made of polystyrene, wood or correx (corrugated plastic). The correx boxes are only suitable to keep the bees in the short term. Although they are cheaper than the wooden or polystyrene nuc boxes, poly and wooden boxes can be kept and re-used for splitting, mating queens or to make up new nucs in the future.
- Bees purchased in a nuc should be transferred to a full-sized hive after a day or two in their new location. They need space to expand so should not be held in the nuc box for too long.

# Guidelines for purchasing nucleus colonies

When inspecting a nuc you intend to purchase, perform the following checks to ensure it is appropriate.

## Combs and frames

- Ensure the frames in the nuc that you purchase are the correct size to fit into your hive.
- The frames should be securely nailed/pinned and be in sound order. They need not be new but should have been thoroughly cleaned.
- Combs should be fully drawn out, i.e. not wax foundation. The outer combs can be food only, especially on the outside faces. The comb should be clean and new, or at least relatively recent. Do not accept nucs with dark/black combs.
- Combs should be reasonably free of brace comb and the frames should be easy to remove from the nuc box.



Figure 1: Nuc colonies are smaller than full-sized colonies and are usually made up of five to six brood frames

## Queen

- An established young, mated, laying queen should be present.
- The queen may be marked with the 'standard' colour for the year (although it may not be reliable to assume the colour marking will comply with the convention).
- If unclipped, the queen's wings may be clipped at the request of the purchaser and with the agreement of the supplier.
- The queen may be transported caged (for safety and proof of delivery) for release at the destination by the beekeeper. In such cases, full instructions should be provided to assist this process to avoid losses.
- If requested, the supplier should be able to provide purchasers with records of the source of all queens.

## Brood

- At least three frames with brood should be present, with brood in all stages.
- Brood should have a continuous and consistent brood pattern.
- At least 30% of the total comb area should be sealed brood.

- No more than 15% of the total comb area should be drone brood.
- There should be no active queen cells at any stage of development.

### Feeding

- The food requirements of a nucleus can vary considerably. A six frame nucleus will require two to three combs of honey and a whole frame of pollen, while smaller nucs may require slightly less.
- Ensure that newly hived nucleus colonies are provided ample food to get established; this usually consists of a thin sugar syrup to help them draw out fresh wax from the fresh foundation provided.

### Adult bees

- There should be a good balance of adult bees of different ages and the frames should be well covered in bees.
- The bees should be good tempered when handled by a competent handler in suitable conditions.
- There may be a varying number of drones depending on the time of year.

### Health

- The brood should be healthy and not show any signs of disease at any stage.
- In the adult bees there should be no obvious signs of any disease, for example: CBPV which can result in bees that look dark, greasy and trembling; deformed wing virus which can result in dead pupae and bees with damaged wings (associated with a heavy *Varroa* infestation) or *Nosema*, which can cause dysentery.
- There should be no visible signs of *Varroa* mites or wax moth.



Figure 2: When checking a nucleus colony before purchase, ensure that there is brood in all stages of development. Make sure that the brood looks healthy: uncapped brood should be plump, pearly white and 'C' shaped and capped brood should be dry and biscuit coloured. If in doubt, do not proceed with the purchase.

# Best-practice for suppliers

## A honey bee nucleus supplier following best practice should:

- State the total number of combs present. A nucleus should be in a position to expand as soon as purchased, without the risk of starvation.
- Provide containers that have adequate ventilation to allow for transportation.
- Regularly check all stocks for signs of disease. All personnel involved in the production and distribution of nuclei should be competent in recognising bee diseases and pests and, if necessary, have attended a recognised practical bee diseases and pests identification training course. Pest and disease recognition information should be available to all staff for identification purposes.
- Report any statutory diseases or pests found in stocks held or sold immediately to the National Bee Unit (NBU). If a statutory disease or pest is suspected to be present in any stocks, no stocks on the premises may be moved or sold until they have been inspected by an NBU Bee Inspector (Note: these are requirements of the Bee Diseases and Pests Control (England) Order 2006).
- Keep records of all sales of nuclei and the date of despatch. The records should include the purchaser's name and address and contact telephone number(s) and email (where possible). Under the 2006 Order, this information will need to be provided to the NBU if a statutory pest or disease is found on your premises to enable them to carry out follow up checks on the stocks sold.
- Provide a comprehensive care and development instruction sheet with all sales of nuclei. This must include details of any treatments (including for *Varroa*) that have been applied to the nuclei and the dates on which these were administered in line with statutory requirements under Veterinary Medicines legislation.
- Have a published customer conflict policy to cover any disputes with purchasers.

## Are you registered on BeeBase?



BeeBase is a FREE online service provided by the National Bee Unit to help protect you and your fellow beekeepers from pests and diseases that threaten the health of honey bee colonies.

If there is a disease outbreak in your area, the NBU team uses BeeBase to contact local beekeepers to arrange precautionary inspections to check for any signs of infection and to advise on what to do.

**Register today at: [www.nationalbeeunit.com](http://www.nationalbeeunit.com)**

This leaflet was produced as part of the Healthy Bees Plan. The Healthy Bees Plan aims to address the challenges facing beekeepers in sustaining the health of honey bees and beekeeping in England and Wales. It has been jointly developed by governments, beekeepers, their associations and other stakeholders.

For more information on the Healthy Bees Plan, please visit:

[www.nationalbeeunit.com/bee-health-improvement/the-healthy-bees-plan-2030/](http://www.nationalbeeunit.com/bee-health-improvement/the-healthy-bees-plan-2030/)

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

National Bee Unit, APHA, York Biotech Campus, Sand Hutton, York. YO41 1LZ. Telephone: 0300 303 0094, email: [nbuoffice@apha.gov.uk](mailto:nbuoffice@apha.gov.uk) NBU website: [www.nationalbeeunit.com](http://www.nationalbeeunit.com)

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APHA is an Executive Agency of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and also works on behalf of the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Food Standards Agency to safeguard animal and plant health for the benefit of people, the environment and the economy