

A New Approach to Mentoring



When I wanted to set up training hives for people new to beekeeping, there was a bit of uncertainty within my local beekeeping club. The club's standard mentoring procedure of matching more experienced beekeepers with new beekeepers had been the normal practice for more than 10 years, even though its efficacy had diminished. Change is never easy.

I had been the club's mentoring coordinator for a number of years. The beekeeping training program had expanded from one class of 10 students to four classes with 15 students in each. Because of classroom space limits, people had to be turned away. This growth is primarily due to the expanding interest in beekeeping specifically and the "know your food" movement in general. It is a great time to be involved with beekeeping!

My local bee club is very good at classroom training, woodenware procurement, hive assembly instruction, providing spring packages, and holding various field days to link all of this into a logical beekeeper education package.

The original approach of the mentoring program was to pair experienced beekeepers with new students. As the beekeeping classes grew in size, it became impossible to supply enough mentors to cover all the mentees. New students were missing the hands-on engagement that is a key to successful beekeeping. I had learned beekeeping from an experienced mentor and recognized how important this experience was. Beekeeping skills are best learned by working with bees.

As the mentoring program became less functional, a number of ideas were discussed and discarded. All of these concepts involved the mentor driving to many new bee yards, matching mentor to mentee, and juggling travel distance, experience levels, and several other factors usually out of anyone's control. These ideas were just not feasible, but the need for hands-on instruction for so many new beekeepers was more pressing than ever.

Last fall, after a season of driving, emails, panicked phone calls, and long discussions with club members, the idea came to me – why not bring the new beekeepers to a training yard? One trip to a central location for everyone on scheduled days seemed to make more sense than random solo trips to students' bee yards. What was observed at these training hives could be discussed and the knowledge taken back and applied to the student beekeeper's hive. Questions could be asked and answered with the group learning from each other's input -- the one-room schoolhouse concept!

In April of this year, my bee club donated two complete hive sets (I opted for eight-frame equipment) and two packages for the training yard. It was a leap of faith on everyone's part. I found the perfect place for these hives and reached an agreement with the site's management team. The hives are located on a large property that is primarily used for agricultural training and the staff includes people from the state's land-grant university.

I wrote a brief synopsis of the training yard plan and distributed it at the club meetings. I kept to the same schedule new beekeepers were facing: woodenware in March and packages in April. The first step was to assemble the two new hives and get them onto the stands. The club sponsored field days to demonstrate hive assembly and hive management. New beekeepers were introduced to the training yard plan and given contact information. Woodenware was distributed and the final schedule for package delivery was completed. The well-oiled club process kicked in and new beekeepers had their assembled hives and packages.

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In the training yard, I installed one package the normal way, and it went well. As luck would have it, the second package had a dead queen. “Better me than a new beekeeper who was just getting started,” was my first thought, followed by “now what do I do?” The club normally has extra queens just for this problem, so back I went to the package distribution site to pick up a replacement queen. The training yard had only had the bees in it for an hour and already we had a new learning opportunity! We picked out a live queen from the extras, leaving the dead one with the distribution team as an example of what to look for. In the rush to get their bees installed, many new beekeepers would not think to look at the caged queen to be sure she is alive.

Back at the training yard, we installed the live queen just as one would for any re-queening. Lesson number two and we were only three hours into our training yard program. We agreed to give the two hives a week and meet back with the goal of checking to be sure the queens were out. Because these hives were set up as the new beekeepers would be experiencing, all the frames were foundation.

As this training yard experience progressed, I got a swarm call and was able to capture a reasonably-sized swarm not far from the training yard. Since the swarm was in a five-frame nuc hive, I thought it would be a perfect teaching element to add to the training yard.



By this time, the group was obsessed with beekeeping! Everyone was having fun working as a group, sharing ideas and questions, and generally bringing a cooperative dynamic to beekeeping. Since the bees are for training, there appears to be less hesitancy to pull frames and look at brood conditions. What the bees are doing and how the comb appears is better determined than if the new beekeepers were conducting the same inspection at their personal hives with no guidance.

All was going well! One day after checking the hives, we were standing around talking (beekeepers love to talk bees) when a swarm flew over! It disappeared but inspired the next logical adventure – the installation of a swarm catch box in a nearby tree. I have no idea where the swarm originated, but it worked and I was thrilled to see that our swarm box had become their new home.

The first swarm was moved into a regular eight-frame hive and the now empty nuc hive was repurposed for the new swarm. Hive number four was up and flying! The group added this additional experience to their growing comfort level with beekeeping and bee behavior.

We now meet on a regular schedule, managing the hives for the progression of the season and resolving issues as they appear. Everyone has the opportunity to look at the frames, describe what they are seeing, and ask questions.

This experience has been more enjoyable and beneficial than anyone would have guessed. We are discussing what to add to next year’s training yard and planning what will be demonstrated for the balance of this year. My personal goal is to teach nuc production and swarm control in 2018. I would like new and seasoned beekeepers to have less reliance on packages and more instruction and success in making their own replacements. The regular training yard participants have made suggestions for changes that should improve local beekeeping and continue the interest that has made all of this possible.