

Best Management Practices for Beekeeping in Illinois

Illinois State Beekeepers Association

www.ilsba.com

(March, 2013)

INTRODUCTION

Beekeeping has become increasingly popular. Although generally docile, honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) can and may sting when they perceive they are being threatened (normally at their beehive). Responsible management is therefore necessary to avoid creating problems for neighbors, particularly in an urban setting.

Under the Illinois Bees and Apiaries Act, the Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDoA) inspects honeybee colonies as a service to the beekeeping industry. The purpose of the inspections is to determine the general health of honeybee colonies. During the course of an inspection, IDoA Apiary Inspectors closely examine beehives to detect diseases and pests and to provide advice on needed treatments. Inspections are provided free of charge to beekeepers around the state. To access more information concerning the Illinois Bees and Apiary Program, go to www.agr.state.il.us/programs/bees/index.html

The Act also **requires** beekeepers to register their colonies with the IDoA. Registration is as simple as completing a brief one-page form and mailing it to the Illinois Department of Agriculture, State Fairgrounds, P.O. Box 19281, Springfield, IL 62794-9281. A registration certificate is provided to beekeepers who register with the IDoA. There is also no charge for registering honeybee colonies with the IDoA. To download a registration form, go to www.agr.state.il.us/programs/bees/beekeep.pdf

GENERAL BEST PRACTICES

Education

The first and most critical step in responsible beekeeping is education. All beekeepers should have a solid understanding of honeybee biology and basic beekeeping methods. The Illinois State Beekeepers Association (ISBA) also encourages all beekeepers to join the ISBA as well as a local association. We strongly suggest that new beekeepers take a beginning beekeeping course and read several different beekeeping guides. Many local associations offer honeybee classes and/or will mentor beekeepers. Beekeepers should stay informed of recommended changes in beekeeping practices, threats to honeybee health and government regulations.

Colony Temperament /Queens

While generally docile, honeybees can sting. A colony's temperament is determined by its queen's characteristics. Any colony exhibiting unusually defensive behavior (stinging or attempting to sting without provocation) or an excessive swarming tendency should be requeened as soon as possible.

Beekeepers should evaluate their queens on a regular basis for performance and hive gentleness. Only queens of European origin should be used. Queens should only be obtained from the most reliable sources. Local sources, where available, are preferred in order to reduce the chances of introducing Africanized honeybees and to ensure that the queen is well suited to the climate.

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Hive Placement

Beekeepers should comply with all homeowner association and local ordinances and regulations pertaining to beekeeping. Correct placement of hives is a very important consideration for responsible beekeeping in urban and suburban settings. Hives must be placed in a quiet area of the lot and not directly against a neighboring property unless a solid fence or dense plant barrier of six feet or higher forms the property boundary. Hives should be kept as far away as possible from roads, sidewalks and rights of way. Flight paths into the hive should remain within the owner's lot. Barriers, including solid fencing, hedges and shrubs more than six feet high may be used to redirect the bees' flight pattern.

Considerate Hive Management

Before setting up your hives it is a good idea to inform your neighbors where you intend to place the hives. Respond to and discuss their concerns; an informed neighbor is more likely to be an understanding neighbor. Beekeepers are encouraged to post signs to alert neighbors and passersby to the presence of their hives; generally it is best to place such signs so that they are only in view when the public would otherwise be able to view the hives

Beekeepers should take into account that weather conditions influence bee behavior and plan to work bees when conditions are favorable. They should make sure that neighbors are not outdoors when they open hives and should perform hive manipulations as quickly as possible with minimum disturbance to the bees. Extended hive manipulations, particularly when removing honey, should be carefully planned to accommodate neighbors' activities. A smoker should be used when working bees. Hive entrances should be smoked before mowing or trimming in the hive area. Clippings and exhaust should be directed away from hive entrances.

Provision of water

Beekeepers should provide water for their bees before locating them in their yard. Bees prefer a sunny place with surface moisture, for example wet sand or gravel or the edge of a birdbath. If you establish such water sources, your bees will become habituated to them and will be less likely to visit swimming pools or hot tubs. Remember that in very hot weather, bees use a large amount of water to maintain temperature and humidity within the hive.

Swarming

While swarming is natural honeybee behavior, it is one that should be prevented or minimized, especially in urban and suburban settings. Two primary causes of swarming are congestion and poor ventilation in the hive. To avoid these conditions, beekeepers should consider:

- Brood chamber manipulation
- Colony division
- Addition of supers for brood rearing and honey storage
- Replacement of old or failing queens

These and other swarm management practices are explained in detail in most good beekeeping textbooks.

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When a swarm occurs, efforts should be made to collect the swarm. Swarms captured from locations where the origin of the bees may be questionable should be monitored frequently for abnormal defensiveness.

Robbing Behavior

When nectar is scarce, honeybees may rob honey from other hives which makes them appear more defensive. Under such conditions, beekeepers should work hives for only short periods of time and only if really necessary. Exposed honey outdoors often encourages robbing. All empty hive equipment should be removed or securely sealed. Areas used for honey extraction should be bee-proofed to prevent robbing situations.

Disease Control

There are a number of honeybee diseases and pests which cause concern for beekeepers. Some diseases, like American Foulbrood, are extremely contagious; beekeepers should be extremely cautious about mixing hive equipment and purchasing used equipment for this reason. It is incumbent on beekeepers to manage all disease and pests, including parasitic mites, to ensure colony health and honey quality.

AFRICANIZED HONEYBEE

The Africanized honeybee ("AHB") has expanded its range from South America and arrived in the United States around 1990. Since that time, AHB have colonized in several southern states including Florida, Texas and California. It is not yet known whether ABH will be able to establish in cooler climates.

Management to Avoid AHB Introduction and Establishment

The recommended techniques intended for maintenance of European stock include:

- Purchase queens, packaged bees, and nucleus colonies from reputable sources outside of Africanized honey bee (AHB) infested areas or localities adjacent to AHB infested areas. The current distribution in the U.S. can be seen at <http://ars.usda.gov/AHBmap>
- Bi-annual requeening of hives and requeening of swarms with certified European stock purchased from reliable sources (local when possible).
- Maintaining requeening records and purchase documentation
- Monitoring the behavior of the bees and replacing the queen immediately if the hive becomes difficult to manage

Any beekeeper who witnesses unusually defensive behavior should take the following steps:

- Contact the Illinois Department of Agriculture Apiary Inspector for your area www.agr.state.il.us/programs/bees/inspectors.html or the IDoA's Apiary Inspection Supervisor at 217/782-6297.
- Requeen immediately with certified European stock
- Monitor requeened hive for continued defensiveness

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Treat all honey bees with respect. Treating all honey bees with respect is a fundamental pillar of beekeeping as honey bees are indispensable and important to the human food supply.

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DISCLAIMER

This document is and always will be a work in progress, intended for regular update and revision. It offers guidelines for responsible beekeeping in the State of Illinois but is not intended to provide legal advice.