Installing Package Bees

B. E. Montgomery
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bee management series

installing PACKAGE BEES

What they are
Where to get them
How to install them
Care before and after installing

Cooperative Extension Service PURDUE UNIVERSITY Lafayette, Indiana
INSTALLING PACKAGE BEES

by

B. E. Montgomery, Extension Entomologist

PACKAGE BEES--WHAT ARE THEY?

Many beekeepers in the South produce bees to market in the North. These bees are generally available in early spring before colonies in the North build up to any considerable strength. The bees are packaged for shipment in wire screen cages--hence the name, package bees.

Packages usually contain from to 2 to 5 pounds of bees and a queen. A 2-pound package will contain almost 7,000 bees; and a 3-pound package, between 10,000 and 11,000. Queenless packages are also available.

To establish a colony that can produce as much honey the first year as a good over-wintered colony, a 3-pound package is best.

USES OF PACKAGE BEES

In Indiana, package bees are used (1) to start new colonies, (2) to replace colonies lost over winter or (3) to strengthen queenless or weak ones. Queenless packages are often used to strengthen weak colonies, but this is a questionable practice. A weak colony may be the result of a poor queen, so simply adding more workers will not correct the situation.

WHERE AND WHEN TO GET PACKAGE BEES

Package bees may be obtained from most bee supply dealers, or directly from southern producers, whose advertisements appear in bee journals.
Order packages anytime from October to February for delivery on April 5 to April 25, depending on your location in the state. Colonies established at this time can build up on fruit bloom, dandelions and other spring blossoms.

PREPARATIONS BEFORE PACKAGE BEES ARRIVE

Sometime before the arrival date, you should make some necessary preparations to receive and install the bees.

First, each package should have its own hive. The hive includes (1) a bottom board, (2) a hive body with frames of empty combs or foundation, (3) an extra empty hive body to serve as a cover for a pail of sugar syrup, (4) an outer cover and (5) if possible, an entrance reducer. (If the hive does not have a reducer, a loose mass of fresh grass over the entrance will do.) The sugar syrup feeder is simply a 10-pound, friction-top pail (the type used for honey or syrup) with a few holes punched in the lid with a 3-penny nail. The bees take the syrup when the pail is inverted over the hive body.

Another very important step in preparation is to arrange with the express agent or postmaster to call if the bees cannot be delivered immediately. You should examine the packages in the presence of the agent to be sure the queen or many of the bees are not dead. If they are, you should not accept the order until the agent has made and signed a "bad order notation" on the receipt. You should then return the receipt with a note concerning the bees to the shipper. He will replace the shipment.

CARE WHEN THE BEES ARRIVE

The bees do not have to be installed immediately but may be held a few days, if necessary. Store the packages in a dry, cool, dark room, and feed the bees sugar syrup. The syrup is made by dissolving granulated (not brown) sugar in water— one part sugar to one part water. The bees will take
the syrup more readily if it is warm. Paint the syrup on the screen with a brush. And give only as much as the bees will readily take.

INSTALLING THE BEES

The hives should be in their permanent location when you are ready to install the bees. Remove four or five frames from the hive body, and close the hive entrance with the entrance reducers--the 3/8-inch by 1 1/2-inch passageway in position. (A loose mass of fresh grass over the entrance will substitute for entrance reducers). Now, set one bee package and a pail of syrup a few inches from each hive.

Before installing the workers, it's first necessary to install the queen. Remove the board nailed to the top of the package. Keep this board close by because you'll have to close the package later. Shake or jar the bees to the bottom of the package, and remove the queen cage (Figure 1) and feeder can (Figure 2). Then cover the package again with the board.
There will be candy at one end of the queen cage. Remove the cardboard from that end (Figure 3), and punch a hole through the candy with a match or small nail (Figure 4). Then lay the cage lengthwise, screen side down, on two frames in the center and near the rear of the hive. If the entire package is placed in the hive, you may lay the queen cage on top of the package, screen side up (Figure 5).

Now you are ready to transfer the workers from the package to the hive. Use either of two methods. The first is to place the package in the empty space left by the four or five frames which have been removed, and then open the package so the bees can crawl onto the other frames (Figure 5). The second method is to shake the bees into the empty space, and then immediately replace the frames.

After installing the bees, place the inner cover on the hive body with the bee space down. Invert the pail of sugar syrup over the opening in the center of this cover. Then set the empty hive body in place, covering the pail. Finally, put the outer cover on top.
CARE AFTER INSTALLING

The next day, check to see if the bees are coming and going from the hive. If grass was used to close the entrance, make sure it is not too tight to prevent them from passing back and forth. Otherwise, do not disturb the hive for about a week.

After a week, open the hive. Remove the queen cage, and if the package is in the hive, take it out and replace the frames. Do this by moving the frames already in the hive to the center and placing the extra frames on either side. Check those in the center to see if the bees have started working on them. If the colony is developing normally, the foundation will be pulled out (cells started), and there will be eggs and some stored syrup in the cells.

Give the bees a fresh supply of syrup at this time, and continue to supply it as long as the bees take it readily. When the colony is strong enough and nectar is available in the field, the bees will forage for themselves and will no longer take the syrup.

Figure 5.
During the third week, the colony will have its lowest number of bees. Those from the original package will be dying, and no new ones will be emerging from the colony until 21 days after the queen first lays her eggs. If you have established colonies in excellent condition, you may want to transfer mature broods from these colonies to reinforce the package colonies. Give each colony a frame of sealed brood --one in which the brood cells have been capped over. New bees will emerge from this frame almost immediately, replacing the loss of old bees. This will "tide" the colony over until it can produce its own brood.