**Issues with package bees**

Occasionally, people ask me about what happened to their package bees and why they didn’t make it. Several years ago, I commented in one of the group forums about what can go wrong with buying and installing a package of bees, in order to get started in beekeeping. Michael Palmer a very experienced beekeeper from Vermont, has a short video online about why he doesn’t like package bees. He speaks from many years of experience raising and keeping bees alive, and I encourage people to listen to what he has to say about the subject. I remember many years ago getting started in beekeeping buying package bees for my own apiary then back east, as a means of making increase and expanding my colony numbers. At the time it was the only means available to me, as I was still getting my feet wet with beekeeping. Currently, the package bee industry has a hard time delivering enough packages to people wanting to purchase bees. Likewise, purchasing a nucleus colony of bees as an alternative is difficult (at least in our area) as they are in very short supply.

Not wishing to offend anyone, I will add that I am not advocating not purchasing packages, but I would advise, that just like buying a car, it is wise to check under the hood to see exactly what you’re getting, before driving off.

**Origination**

Package bees are made up early each spring by commercial beekeepers, as an income source, as their bees are in abundance at that time of year. If you have never seen how this is done, watch an online video sometime showing how they shake bees through a funnel, and then add a caged queen into the middle of the cluster, along with a can of sugar syrup to help them on their journey. Your package will include nurse bees, older foragers, some drones, and occasionally even a virgin queen or rogue, free roaming mated queen (as well as varroa mites). The bees surrounding the confined queen are not her progeny. Queens for these packages are reared as early as possible by the package producer himself, or purchased from another queen producer, who is cranking out as many early queens as possible. Often times mating conditions are not so favorable, due to unsuitable weather. Generally, queens produced for the package bee industry are not the “cream of the crop” so to speak, as the object is to produce as many as possible; as fast as possible, to keep up with the early demand. In contrast, ask any reputable queen producer the nuances of trying to rear the best queens possible, under optimal mating conditions. Queens reared and nurtured under these conditions are allowed to spend numerous days in a mating nuc to show viable egg laying capacity, and to prove to the producer that they are worthy of caging and selling. These are not the “puppy mill” queens often included with your packages.

**Transportation**

The journey of your ball of bees in a cage is critical to the life expectancy and growth potential of the future colony. The trip to your door is often a cold bumpy ride under not so favorable conditions. A typical timeline would be: the producer makes the package up one day, the distributor picks them up the next day. Transportation to the point of distribution then takes another 2-3 days before you arrange to pick them up a day later, and then deliver them to your final destination.

**Installation / Queen Introduction**

Transferring your bees from the package into your equipment and installing the caged queen should be done expeditiously. Here is where you could ask 5 different beekeepers how best to accomplish this task, and you might receive 10 different answers. The goal is simple, provide a new home for the bees and allow them to release the queen (without rejecting her) so that she can then begin egg laying in order to produce new bees to replace the dwindling bee population that has been dying off. Concerning our timeline to this point, lets add 2-3 days for the queen to be released and accepted, and then perhaps another 2-3 days (or longer) before she lays her first egg. I will interject at this point, that here is where many new beekeepers make their first big mistake. Wanting to make sure that the queen has been released, and insisting upon placing their eyes on her to make sure she’s ok. While it is perfectly normal for any new beekeeper to want to start poking around in this manner to satisfy their curiosity, it may often lead to her early demise. Checking the queen cage the next day, poking a hole in the candy so she can be released sooner, and any other number of reasons to invade the bees at this point is ill advised. These interruptions could very well lead to the bees rejecting (and balling) your precious queen. A better goal is to keep the feeder jar full of syrup, and allow the bees to start drawing comb, and start storing resources.

**Nurse Bees**

Mike Palmer speaks logically and intelligently about the state of a newly installed package of bees as an “unbalanced” condition, as they attempt to transition into a stable colony. A well-balanced colony is: a young laying queen, adequate nurse bees to tend to the eggs and larvae, and numerous foragers to seek out nectar, pollen, and water. We know that even if everything goes well according to our timeline, that it will still take 21 days from your queens first egg before any new bees emerge, and the colony will remain in this unbalanced state until this transition takes place. As we add the days from the time the producer made up the package, to the day that you finally have new bees emerging, its clear to see that you now have a lot of very old bees. In fact, old forage bees, are now forced to transition back to being a nurse bee to tend to the brood, for the survival of the colony. It is very common at this point that the colony could decide that their new queen is either failing or inferior, and they may decide to supersede her, even thought she could very well be a perfectly good queen. It has been stated that package bee mortality rate is high, with 60-80% of newly installed packages not making it through the first year.

**Suggestions**

There is a saying that “if you have bees that you can also make bees”, and this is true. Inserting a frame of emerging brood from another colony, into a newly installed package of bees is a good way to boost colony population immediately, and mitigate the unbalanced situation. If you have existing colonies and extra bees and brood however, you might also consider the purchase of a more “select” queen of known genetics, one of your choice, and install her into your own “nucleus”. For me this is a much-preferred method.

Typically, a new beekeeper has little resources of extra equipment (and drawn comb) and will need to install the package onto undrawn frames of foundation, and this new colony must start from scratch, other than the syrup you will need to provide, so that they may begin to draw out the foundation. Having a few extra frames of (clean) drawn comb at this time to insert into your hive, would greatly assist your bees to get established quicker.

To any new beekeeper, you are certainly off the hook if something might happen to your newly installed package of bees. Having installed hundreds of packages over the hears I will testify that many things can and will happen, when trying to establish a colony.

**Some Questions**

Q. I went into my newly installed hive of bees and I can’t find the queen!

A. Don’t look for the queen, but look instead for eggs surrounded by pollen and nectar stores on the same frame, as a positive sign. If you have eggs, you have a queen.

Q. I can’t find anymore eggs or brood in my hive what happened?

A. Supersedure is very common in newly installed package bees. Look for queen cells, especially ones that are capped, and if you have eggs, or cells, close the hive up and leave them alone. Read up on how long it takes a colony to rear a new queen from a larvae to a hatched queen, to a mated queen, and finally to a laying queen. When this happens to me, I usually write the date on top of the hive and go back in *no sooner* than 30 days. Patience can be a great asset working with bees. It is also a common mistake among any beekeeper at this time to try to install another mated queen during a potential supersedure process, only to have the bees reject your $35.00 dollar queen, and kill her, as soon as she is released.

**Risks of Ordering Package Bees**

Transporting live bees over great distances in springtime is a risky proposition; and paying anyone a deposit for future receipt of bees, enabling them to pay for expenses before you actually receive your bees, is a risk you will assume. Before ordering a package of bees, make sure you ask:

1. How long has this company been transporting and selling package bees successfully?
2. Know the sellers refund policy. What happens if the packages arrive in poor shape? What if the queen is dead in her cage at time of my introduction? What is their replacement policy?
3. Not all package bees are created equally. A few hundred dead bees at the bottom of the cage are a normal bee die-off during transit, but having an inch of dead bees at the bottom of the cage when they arrive is **not**. Reputable package bee producers include extra weight of bees to account for normal mortality during transportation, and the supplier’s responsibility should be to provide you with a healthy-looking package (of live bees) when they arrive.

Good luck with your bees! Bee well.

San Juan Apiaries

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