

Standard and Guidance Notes for Nuclei

This leaflet is to provide both buyers and sellers with sensible guidance for the sale of nuclei. There has been no standard since the withdrawal of British Standard B.S. 1372 in 1984.

Purpose

This standard concentrates on nuclei, simply because the majority will probably be purchased by beginners and owing to their inexperience they will need guidance on what to expect. Since bees are living things and general conditions and weather varies, there may be good reasons for the occasional slight departure from the standard.

If you expect to buy a nucleus to these standards you should check with the seller that it complies with the "BBKA Standard". If not, then there may be a reason and the buyer may have a difficult decision to make.

Bees are often in short supply very early in the season and it may be tempting to buy something you may later regret, when a few weeks of patience may be well rewarded.

For practical purposes this standard is only applicable to a nucleus supplied between early May-end August.

Nucleus Structure:

A nucleus is a well balanced colony on between 3-5 B.S. brood combs. It should have bees, food, brood and a queen as described below. The total number of combs should be stated. For bees on other sizes of frames the buyer and seller should reach agreement.

A nucleus should be in a position to expand as soon as purchased, without risk of starvation. It is not just the number of bees, but the queen and the quantity and age of the brood that are important.

Combs and Frames:

The frames should be securely nailed or pinned and be in sound order. They need not be new. Combs should be fully drawn out i.e. not foundation. The outside combs can be food only, especially on the outside faces. There should be no sacrificial drone comb (shallow frames).

Queen:

There should be a current or previous season's UK reared laying queen and she should have produced all the brood. If the queen is older, this should be stated to the buyer. She should be clipped and marked if requested. It may not be reliable to assume the colour marking will comply with international queen marking colours.

It is BBKA policy not to recommend the use of imported queens. You should ask the seller if you are concerned about the origin of the queen.



A good brood comb. Bees have been shaken off to show brood and sealed stores. A frame like this should be well covered with bees.

Brood:

There should be healthy brood and eggs in all stages with no brood cycle break. Not less than 30% of the total comb area should be sealed brood. No more than 15% of the total area should be drone comb. The brood should have a good pattern with no drone brood in worker cells. There should be no active queen cells at any stage of development.

Food:

The amount of honey and pollen in a nucleus can vary considerably owing to conditions, but there should be enough food for at least two weeks, to allow for poor foraging weather after purchase.

Adult Bees:

There should be a good balance of young and flying bees and the frames should be well covered. They should be good tempered when handled by a competent beekeeper in suitable conditions. There may be a varying number of drones depending on the season.

Health:

The brood should be healthy and not show any signs of disease in any stage, except that a small number of cells showing chalk brood is acceptable, as this can partly depend on weather conditions.

In the adult bees there should be no obvious signs of acarine, nosema or deformed wing virus. As varroa is endemic a very small number of mites on adult bees is acceptable.

Purchasers are advised to inspect the brood closely and seek guidance from their Regional Bee Inspector if they are concerned about the possibility of foul brood disease.

Hiving and Care Instructions:

If your nucleus is sourced locally and the seller is able to help you there is no need for instructions, but if the seller is unable

to help, then a set of clear hiving and care instructions should be provided.

Other Considerations:

General:

It must be accepted that some suppliers may not be able to comply with some of the above for good reasons and the structure of the nucleus may vary. These variations may include such things as:-

- the nucleus is made up of bees and brood from several different colonies,
- the queen is not responsible for all the brood present,
- the queen is caged (not on the brood) and/or not yet proven, or
- the nucleus may be the result of a swarm control manipulation, rather than part of a managed queen and nucleus creation programme.

Such variations should be declared before the purchase takes place. Whilst they are legitimate forms of nuclei where a bit more care may be needed, they are not recommended for the beginner without help from an experienced beekeeper.

The supplier should be able to state what treatments (including those for Varroa) have been administered to the nucleus and when. There is a legal requirement to record all medications applied to food producing animals, therefore it is reasonable to ask for this information so you have a record. Make sure all applied treatments are legal, as any residues of illegal substances found in honey and wax will be your responsibility once the bees are yours.

If your BKA or another beekeeper is doing you a favour by giving you a nucleus or selling it to you at an advantageous price it is unreasonable to apply this standard, although it is reasonable to expect help and guidance to get the nucleus into the condition implied by this standard.

Container:

A nucleus sourced locally may be in a nucleus or travelling box, but expect a commercially sourced nucleus to have a temporary non returnable container. Be sure that you agree with the seller on what equipment is returned or replaced.

If the bees are confined for more than a few hours they should have ample ventilation and have water sprayed or dribbled on them regularly through the ventilation holes.

Transportation:

Bees suffer stress when confined and moved, so to minimise this make the journey as short as possible. It would be preferable to collect the nucleus rather than have it delivered by a carrier, who may not treat it with care, or who might cover up ventilation holes, allow the bees to get overheated or delay delivery.

If you collect make sure you treat them gently and do not keep them in a hot car or in full sun. If overheated the combs can melt and collapse which will quickly kill the colony.

Advice to Buyer:

If the buyer is new to beekeeping it is advisable to seek sound advice from a local BKA, where you may get help to inspect the bees before purchase. This can avoid some of the problems that are not always obvious to an inexperienced buyer.

If you are buying a nucleus for a present please make sure the recipient is willing to accept it, as there is a high level of commitment needed in keeping bees. If the bees are unwanted it could result in them being abandoned and causing a nuisance to others.

Complaints:

A nucleus can change character very quickly, therefore any complaints should be lodged within a few days. Inexperienced buyers would do well to seek guidance from an experienced beekeeper when transferring a nucleus and this is where early contact with a local BKA is invaluable. If there are any problems, take dated photographs and notes as early as possible. Please remember it is unfair to make a complaint if a fault has been created after delivery.

General Notes:

This leaflet is one of a series intended to help beekeepers and non-beekeepers. If you believe the contents of this leaflet are relevant to you, please seek further advice from an experienced beekeeper or your tutor.

Information is updated regularly – please check with the BBKA web site at: www.bbka.org.uk – for the latest information.

This leaflet supersedes B14 (2009, 2nd edition).

Note: The same information is published in our printed leaflet L014 available from the BBKA.

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