

Apis m. Esoteria 4a

Installing a package

There are many ways to install a package of bees into a hive body or a nuc. I prefer installing the package into a 10-frame deep hive body. Then if I want a “nuc” I will move the frames into a 5 frame nuc box once the colony is settled and working. I will place the nuc where the hive body was sitting.

The important principal that I try to follow is “do it the easiest way possible”.

When you receive the package, the bees have been cooped up in the shipping cage for 1-5 days. It depends on the shipping method used. You can pick your bees up yourself from the producer (1 day). You can get the bees from a local shipper (2-3 days depending on when they were packaged and how far you live away from the producer). You can get them in the mail (1-5 days Express overnight mail, 3-day ground transportation, 3-5 days mailed from an intermediary sales point who picked them up from the producer).

You want to know where the bees are coming from and how they are going to get to you. If you do not pick them up from the producer yourself, it is best if you know the shipper. The more intermediary handlers and the distance shipped will impact the viability of the bees in the package.

Once you get your package you need to inspect the package. If you are only picking up a few packages you can do this at the pickup location. If you are receiving lots of packages spot check a few as a sample.

Look for the number of dead bees in the bottom of the shipping package. A couple of hundred dead bees would not be abnormal the longer the bees are shipped. Fewer is better. Up to 30% could be acceptable if shipped in transit for several days.

Inspect the shipping package for damage. Is the screen torn or punctured? Is the wooden part of the package broken? This is a sign of improper handling.

Is there a queen cage in the package? It may be hard to see since the normal situation is for the queen cage to be covered with calm bees. Thump the entire cage on the ground and the bees will fall to the cage

bottom exposing the queen cage. In the hustle and bustle of filling the packages they might have forgotten to put in the queen cage.

You are now home. You set the hive bodies up in the correct location with frames installed before you went and picked up the packages from the shipper. You already have your syrup feeders ready to insert into the hives. You have a spray bottle containing 1:1 syrup. Beekeeper clothing protection is your option. I recommend at least a good securable veil. All other apparel is based on your bravery.

Think through this procedure before you start. Set your necessary tools to the side where they will be handy. You need a hive tool, syrup spray bottle, and however you are going to hang the queen cage in the hive. You might need a ventilated closure system for the hive entrance. If you have screened bottom boards this is not necessary. A folded over 2" wide strip of screen is sufficient.

Remove 5-6 frames from the hive body, push the remain frames to one side. This will make space to insert the entire shipping package into the hive body. Spray the inside of the hive box with syrup water to help hold the bees once they are place in the box. Close the hive entrance to force the bees to accept their new home.

Spray the bees in the package through the screen with syrup water to calm them down. DO NOT SMOKE A PACKAGE! When you smoke bees, they engorge themselves with honey and calm down. Since there is no honey in the package the bees will only get mad. The syrup water spray will cause the bees to start licking up the syrup and cleaning their buddies. This will calm them.

Be calm, work quickly, and surely. "Honey bees can smell fear"! Dropping an open shipping cage scares the bees. Try not to get them all excited.

Place the package top up on a firm surface. This can be the ground. With the hive tool, remove the wooden cover from over the shipping syrup can. Set the lid to the side where you can easily grab it later.

Unstaple the strap holding the queen cage in place inside the package. DO NOT let the strap loose and drop the queen cage to the bottom of the package.

Pick up the shipping package, turn it upside down with your hand over the syrup can so it drops into you hand. The queen cage should remain in place as you do this. The can should drop out several inches or most of the way out. You may need to jar the cage gently to loosen the can. You may need to use the edge of your hive tool to pry it loose. Don't let it fall all the way out. Hold the can with one hand, or jam it sideways so it will not go back into the package. Turn the package upright while holding the can and the queen cage strap tightly. Thump the cage down on a firm surface like the telescoping outer top of the hive which is on the ground. Most of the bees should fall to the bottom of the cage.

Holding the queen cage strap firmly with one hand, remove the syrup can from the shipping cage. Knock any hanger on bees off back into the cage hole. Set the can down, and grab the wooden square hole cover you removed earlier. Gently pull the queen cage out of the shipping cage, thump it so most of the bees on the queen fall back into shipping cage. Place the wooden cover over the hole so the bees cannot get out. The staples that were used to attach the lid to the cage must be "pointy end up" so the wood will lay flat closing the exit hole on the cage.

Inspect the queen in the queen cage. Is she moving around? How many dead attendant bees are there? Now, hang the queen cage properly between the frame at the "center" of the box and the next one over. Many times, I find the strap is connected to the wrong end of the wooden queen cage. If you hang it incorrectly the queen may not be able to exit the cage.

Make sure the escape hole on the queen cage is up so any dead attendant bees do not block the escaping queen. Usually this is the queen cage end with the candy in it. There may be a cork that needs to be removed making the candy accessible to the bees. Make sure the screen sides of the queen cage are open to the worker bees in between the frames so the queen can be fed.

If your queen is dead you might want to combine 2 packages at this point to preserve the worker bees that were in the package. After you receive a new queen you can resplit the hive. You may be able to get a replacement queen from your shipper or the bee supplier. In reality, if your queen is not dead on day one, it is hard to determine if it was your fault or the shipper's fault when she comes up dead on day 5. Some times the colony does not accept the queen.

Lay the shipping package full of bees on its side in the box where the space where there are no frames. Remove the wooden “lid” as you do this. You might be able to set the package upright if there is enough room. Laying on its side slows the bees escaping for a few minutes.

Place the telescoping cover on the hive. Tomorrow all the bees will have exited the shipping package. Remove it and replace the frames.

Feed the bees depending on which style of feeder you will use. You need to place the feeder full of syrup on the hive before releasing the main body of bees from the shipping package. This allows you to close the hive up as quickly as possible before lots of bees start flying around. The bees will need to be fed syrup to make wax and honey as necessary for the queen to have a place to lay eggs.

In 3 days remove the queen from the queen cage. The workers might eat the candy through in 3 days releasing the queen. If not, go ahead and release her so she can start laying eggs. The sooner the queen can return to egg laying the less likely she will swarm. The bees probably “accepted” the queen during shipment. That is evident by the bees clustered on the queen cage when you removed it from the shipping package. If the bees are upset with the queen, they will be squirming around the outside the cage trying to sting her.

Sometimes a queen is shaken into the package at the producers. You might have a 2-queen situation. In this case you can shake all the bees off the queen cage (bee brush) and store the queen for a split tomorrow. Take 2 frames and 2 cups of bees out of one new hive and place them in a nuc with the queen and a syrup feeder.

At the 5-6 day point open the hive so bees can purge and start foraging. Keep feeding syrup for at least a month. You might want to used the smallest reduced entrance to facilitate the new bees defending against stronger hives in the neighborhood.

There are several styles of plastic shipping packages and plastic queen cages. I have not used any and can't provide expert advice on how to install them.