

Caring for honey bees in the time of COVID-19

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Honey bees are living animals and need to be cared for even with the difficulties brought on by COVID-19. Fortunately, beekeeping is an outdoor activity and provides many beekeepers with a feeling of peace and calm.

Beekeeping promotes physical distancing. However, there are cases where human interaction is necessary, like purchasing and receiving beekeeping supplies, getting packages or nucleus colonies (nucs) to start new colonies, connecting with a mentor or mentee, or visiting bees located on someone else's property.

FOLLOW CDC GUIDELINES

COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets in the air and by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching the mouth, nose, and possibly eyes. Follow as more information is released from the [CDC](#).

PURCHASING AND RECEIVING BEEKEEPING SUPPLIES

Many stores are closed to people entering to make purchases. However, there are two options to get beekeeping supplies: order from a supply company or for delivery, or order from a local distributor or store for pick-up. A recent study by the National

Institute of Health demonstrated that the virus can be stable for 24 hours on cardboard and up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel. Wipe down the surface of the equipment or box it came in with one of the approved products listed below or let it sit for a few days before dealing with it.

Approved products

- Bleach solution with 5 tablespoons (1/3 cup) bleach per gallon of water or 4 teaspoons bleach per quart of water.
- Alcohol solution with at least 70% ethanol.
- Other approved cleaners can be found on the [EPA website](#). Tip: use the word search in the provided search box on the upper right-hand side of the table to look for products already in your household to see if they are adequate. Some cleaners may damage the item.



A 3-pound package contains about 10,000 bees.

PICKING UP PACKAGE BEES OR NUCS

Package bees and nucs are still coming to Minnesota. There are no current restrictions on moving livestock (check the [MN Department of Agriculture website](#) for updates) and commercial beekeepers providing the bees are caring for livestock, an [essential service](#). When picking up your bees, follow a few steps to protect you, the supplier, and the bees.

Prepare to pick up the bees

- Carefully read the instructions provided by the supplier. If no instructions were provided, ask the supplier for any additional information. If picking up from Nature's Nectar, check their [blog](#) for updates.
- Prepare your equipment before receiving the bees. Collect and assemble all hive components: painted hive body, frames, cover, bottom board, entrance reducer, stand, pollen patty, feeder filled with 1:1 sugar syrup, (make by mixing 4 pounds of white sugar with enough hot water to make 1 gallon), and any other components specific to your set-up. Note: Grocery stores have been running out of white sugar. If you do not have enough to feed your bees, then check if the bee supplier sells sugar or sugar syrup.
- Spray bottle with 1:1 sugar syrup.
- Protective gear: veil, hive tool, smoker and fuel, lighter, and gloves if necessary.
- Oxalic acid and the accompanying equipment if you plan to treat the package for Varroa mites.
- Clean out space in your vehicle. If needed, plan to wedge, bungee, or strap the container the bees are in so they don't tip and the package screen or nuc ventilation

holes won't be covered. Put down a tarp to catch any spilled syrup.

- If you have the bees in the cab with you, have protective gear within reach if you would be nervous if any bees escape - normally the bees just fly to the windows.
- Keep the bees between 50° and 70°F. Nucs are more prone to overheating than packages.
- Pay beforehand if possible. If not, bring a check or exact change to reduce the exchange of money. Clean your hands before and after any exchange.
- Pack a "clean bag" with hand sanitizer, disposable gloves, and cleaning wipes or supplies.

Prepare to pick up the bees

- Bring the instructions from the supplier either on a device or printed. Follow the directions.
- The supplier may put the package or nuc in your vehicle for you to reduce contact. Make sure the person can easily place the bees in the prepared location. If you are nervous about where the bees are placed, drive out of the way, then pull over to check that the bees are secure.
- Use disposable gloves when handling the outside of the package or nuc. Dispose of gloves by turning them inside out while taking them off your hands, taking care not to touch the outside of a glove. If using gloves is not possible, use hand sanitizer immediately after touching the box. If the bees are in a nuc box, wipe down the box surface with one of the approved products listed above. Avoid getting cleaning product on the bees as it can kill them.

- When the pick-up is done, use hand sanitizer to clean your hands. Wipe down any surface you touched.
- Transport the bees to your apiary or a place to store the bees temporarily. If you can't hive the package bees immediately, store them in a quiet, dark place kept between 50° and 70°F. Spray package bees with 1:1 sugar water twice per day, but do not drown them. Hungry bees are angry bees. Place a tarp below the package to catch any sugar syrup spray.

For instructions on how to hive a package, watch [Beekeeping in Northern Climates at 9:23](#) or [Hiving Bees in Rain and Sleet](#) - the instructions hold for hiving bees in nicer weather, just spray the bees down more with the sugar syrup.

WORKING WITH A MENTOR OR MENTEE

In-person learning is generally the best way to learn beekeeping. Mentors can be an invaluable resource for mentees. However, due to physical distancing restrictions and staying at home, unless performing an essential service, mentors and mentees will often need to communicate using technology.

Communication options

- Use a video chat while going through a colony for real-time visuals and communications. Apps like Skype, Zoom, FaceTime for Apple users, or Google Duo for Android and Apple users can be used for video chatting.
- Texting or pairing a phone call with texting pictures can also occur in real time as you look through a colony, but doesn't require an app.
- A regular phone call can work fine. It lacks the visuals, but is easy.

KEEPING BEES ON ANOTHER PERSON'S PROPERTY

Having bees on another person's property can bring extra challenges. Ask your contact person if they have special requests or considerations when you visit your colonies. They may want to know when you will be there or have other specific instructions. Be considerate of their wishes - this is a time of high stress for many people.

When visiting your bees, keep outside and do not enter anyone's home or business. Avoid touching anything they use, like shed door knobs, gardening equipment, fence latches, etc. If you do touch something, either sterilize the surface with a sanitizing wipe or use hand sanitizer before and after you touch it for both your protection and theirs.

If the landowner is in a group of concern or you just want to spread goodwill, consider leaving a few grocery items outside their door or an extra jar of honey. Be sure to take care to wash your hands before touching anything that they may touch, including the bag any items are in.

FINAL COMMENTS

Be safe and well. Enjoy your time with the bees!

Links:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>

Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2:
<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

Minnesota Board of Animal Health:
<https://www.bah.state.mn.us/covid-19>

Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce: <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce>

Nature's Nectar Blog: <http://naturesnectar.blogspot.com>

Hiving Bees in Rain and Sleet:
<https://www.beelab.umn.edu/resources-beekeepers/videos>

Beekeeping in Northern Climates:
<https://www.beelab.umn.edu/bncvideo>