

Beekeeping Basics

GETTING GOOD HELP

by MEGHAN MILBRATH



Beekeeping is best learned through hands-on experience under the guidance of a knowledgeable mentor. In an ideal world, an aspiring beekeeper would purchase only one piece of equipment their first year: a veil. They would then spend a season working with an experienced, local beekeeper, learning a system of management in real time — adding supers in response to honey flows, making splits when the weather was just right. The next spring, they would start their own apiary with bees from their mentor’s splits. The new beekeeper and the mentor would continue to work together until the new beekeeper had a comfortable grasp of the timing and tasks of an appropriate management system, calling their mentor for troubleshooting or to discuss new gadgets or changes from year to year. Eventually, the “new” beekeeper would have enough experience to tweak the system of their mentor to fit their individual needs and to take on mentees of their own. I was lucky enough to learn beekeeping through this system, and the hours working with experienced beekeepers made a huge difference in my ability to care for my bees. However, most aspiring beekeepers are not so lucky.

In order for this system to work, a new beekeeper needs two things: a flexible schedule and access to a mentor. Many people have to work jobs or have family responsibilities with strict hours that make working around a mentor’s schedule impossible. They can’t take the day off to make splits when the weather is right, or to be

immediately available to help pull honey. Even if a new beekeeper has the time, however, it is often impossible to find an experienced beekeeper to work with. With the huge surge in interest in beekeeping, new beekeepers heavily outnumber experienced mentors. In some clubs, the ratio of beginners to experienced beekeepers can be about 100:1. How does a new beekeeper get the knowledge and experience that they need if they don’t have the privilege of working one on one with a good mentor? In this article I’ll outline three ways to make sure we can maximize learning opportunities from beekeepers in the absence of an individual mentor:

- 1) How we can best learn from our peers,
- 2) How we can best learn from our experts, and
- 3) How we can best learn from ourselves.

HOW TO BEST LEARN FROM OUR PEERS

With thousands of people getting into beekeeping every year, there is a whole massive group of beekeepers with 1-10 years of experience that you can learn from (even if it is learning what *not* to do!). You can form an informal team, or you can work with your local bee club to set up a more formal program like the one outlined below. (Remember, you don’t have to be a good beekeeper to set up a mentorship program — just a good communicator.) When I was president of my local club, we had a huge issue finding mentors for beginners.

Most of the over 200 beekeepers in the club were pretty new. The system for answering questions was that everyone would just automatically ask the 2-3 most experienced beekeepers for advice. Not only did this system risk burnout for these experts, but more importantly, it also took away teaching opportunities from the other beekeepers. We therefore decided to set up a peer-based learning system. Dan Barry and Kay Wilson of the Ann Arbor Backyard Beekeepers club in Michigan ran a team-based mentorship program for about four years, and felt that it helped many people get started while answering questions for mid-level beekeepers. They wrote out the process, and I’ve used info from them to describe the program below. They estimate their effort in running the program took about 2-3 hours/month, with one larger effort each year to review the list and update contact info (for a mentorship program for about 110 people).

The mentorship program is set up around teams. The Ann Arbor club had about eight teams, and it seemed to work well with about 10 people on a team, but you could do fewer or more. Interested club members would sign up through a Google form on the club website. This form took general contact info (which the beekeeper agreed to share), and people had to self-select as a beginner, mid-level, or expert beekeeper. Strict definitions were used to classify level of expertise, using actual beekeeping skills. (Can you independently make splits? Can you rear queens?)

Google forms allows for notifications for new submissions, and each new person was added to a team based on 1) geographic location; 2) type of hive — Langstroth, top bar, Warre; 3) level of experience; and 4) attention to the size of each group, trying to keep the teams roughly even. The newcomer received a few introductory documents including a Program Summary, a doc called “How to be a good Mentor/Mentee,” and a team roster. Each time we added someone we notified the entire team by email, issued an updated roster for the team, and asked team members to greet the newcomer. For convenience, we usually updated the team rosters (with new members) a few days before our club monthly meeting. We did this in an effort to promote the regular club meeting and to remind folks that the mentorship team was only a small part of what it takes to be successful. With every email or contact, we tried to promote the club meetings, classes, and personal reading. Each spring we sent an email including team roster and description of skill levels to each member of every team. We asked the member to review their contact info, skill level, etc. We asked those with changes to get back with us. Mostly people replied only if they were no longer keeping bees or felt that they considered themselves mid-level or expert keepers.

The idea behind the teams is that beginners and mid-level beekeepers could confer with each other first, and would only go to the experts for confirmation of an idea or to troubleshoot a tougher problem. In our club, the experts were “shared” by all of the teams. This took some of the pressure off the expert beekeepers, who were no longer the first in line for every basic question, and it also gave mid-level and beginner beekeepers the opportunity to gain experience through teaching and talking out issues.

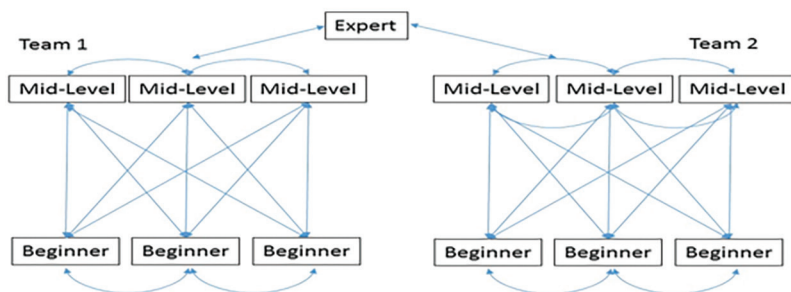
From Dan and Kay: “The differences between the teams were pretty stark. Some groups got together to visit each other’s hives or worked together to extract honey. Other groups checked in and did Q&A via email with regularity, and some groups seemed to do little or nothing at all. We noticed that often times, a mid-level keeper in each group would send out a message to say something like ‘It’s time to do a mite test,’ or ‘We lost 2 hives. How is everyone else doing?’ Because we sent out the emails and rosters, we felt that we got a window into what each group was doing as folk typically were communicating by hitting the ‘reply all.’ On occasion, we noted that a member of a team was giving ‘bad’ info like ‘don’t treat for mites.’ When we noticed that, we made an effort to jump in with our own comments or we contacted one of our experts to ask him/her to respond to the team. Also, we did see that some people asked a mentor from their team to come to their bee yard to help with a problem. That seemed to work out as best we could tell. As mid-level keepers ourselves, we got so much out of visiting other people’s hives to work alongside them.”

If you can take the time to work with your club to set up a peer learning program, do it! If you can’t do a formal program, then consider building your own local team. Reach out to others who live nearby, and do your bee work together. Go to each other’s bee yards, help lift boxes, and talk out when you are going to do splits or apply treatments. While online forums and social media can sometimes be useful, there is nothing more valuable than working with people who are in your area, subject to the same weather and honey flows. The more time you can spend helping each other, the better. You’ll learn from seeing each other’s success and mistakes and by talking through options for hive management.

HOW TO BEST LEARN FROM EXPERTS

You have read the books, scoured articles, asked your friends and peers, and sometimes you just need to call in the big guns. Before you do, make sure you are ready so you can make the best use of both your time and their time.

- **Do your research first.** Talk to your peer group, and make sure you have read as much as you can on the topic, so you know options and common opinions. It is much easier for someone to offer an opinion on a proposed course of action than to just tell you what to do. If you have a problem, think about how you would fix it, and then ask for advice on that solution. Don’t just call and say, “What should I do?” Call and say “I’m having this problem. Here is what I was going to try. What do you think of this plan?”
- **List out your questions specifically, so they are easy to answer over the phone or by email.** Many extension educators, beekeeping instructors, and other mentors are juggling dozens or hundreds of calls, so you want to respect their time by being prepared. Bulleted lists with specific questions are much easier to address than a rambling paragraph.
- **Make sure you have all of the necessary information first.** This means that you have to take good notes. We don’t need to hear the life history of every hive, but there are key details that are essential:
 - How big is the colony? This means the size of the cluster, not how many boxes. Learn to do a cluster count, so you can tell how many frames of bees. (Are 5 frames covered with bees or 30?) At least be descriptive. There is a big difference between a colony the size of a softball and the colony the size of a basketball.
 - When was the last time you saw evidence of a queen in there? Did you see eggs last week or five weeks ago?
 - Be ready with mite counts. Varroa mites continue to be a huge problem. If you are having issues, it is good to rule out mites first when troubleshooting. Even if you treat,



Schematic of a mentor program for a club that had a lot of beginner and mid-level beekeepers

it doesn't mean that you are keeping parasites under control. Before you call, make sure you have a recent mite count.

- Pay attention to the brood. This is where most of the action is. Do the larvae look well fed? Do you see eggs? How much capped brood is there?
- Include clear photos of the brood frames or issues if possible.
- **Listen.** Seriously listen. Use active listening. If you have never been trained in active listening, ask someone close to you if you are a good listener. If they snort-laugh, it may be time to brush up or learn some skills so you can maximize the information you get from others. When you are calling for advice, remember that you are calling for advice. You aren't calling to tell the expert your opinion (unless they ask). This doesn't mean that you have to blindly follow everything that an expert says, but you should at least take the time to hear what they have to say so you can take in the information and process it along with the rest of your research. Many times I'll have people call me to ask my opinion, but interrupt me so many times that by the end of the call I've hardly said a full sentence.

Literally while I was writing this article, I received a phone call from a local queen rearer, asking if I had any queens. He in turn had just received a call from someone who needed a queen because he felt that the one in the package that he received wasn't mated — even though he had added a frame of drones so she would have plenty of drones to mate with in the hive! He didn't want to listen to any advice on the matter, because he knew what he was talking about because years ago he had helped his grandfather take honey off the hives on the farm.

Just set aside your ego for a little bit. If you are calling to ask a question, it isn't important that they know how smart and experienced you are and what you already know. When I get asked a question, it is a lot easier to just respond based on what I know. If I cover information that

*Helping other
beekeepers in
their yard.*

Photo courtesy of
Dan Barry and
Kay Wilson



is more basic, it doesn't mean that I think that you are stupid or don't respect your knowledge, it is usually because I am building up background for a complete thought. If the expert doesn't understand your question or the scenario, or you have a follow-up, by all means, stop them to narrow down the topic, but don't be insulted if they don't know what a great beekeeper you are (or think you are!).

- **Be a good human.** One reason that we have a shortage of mentors is that they are tired of being stomped on by difficult and entitled people. I used to joke that I thought that people believed my name was "So I've got this one hive," because people would just walk up to me at conferences or call me and say Hi! I'm so happy to see you! So I've got this one hive ... Remember that the person you are calling is a person. Think about if you need to make the call at 8 p.m. on a Sunday evening or 7 in the morning. Ask them if it is a good time to talk, or if they can suggest a better time. Many of the people that you are calling will be taking time out of their day for free. For other people, it will be their job. Think about how you would like people to treat you if they were asking you to do your job for free. Be nice!

HOW TO BEST LEARN FROM OURSELVES

Beekeeping is learned through experience. When we talk about experienced beekeepers, we are not referring to people who kept bees perfectly for 20 years with no issues ever. That is not experience — that is impossible. Experience means experience

with treating European foulbrood, with cleaning up deadouts after you didn't control mites, with squishing queens, running over hives with your truck, splitting too early, not feeding enough, etc. (I have done all of these and more. So many more mistakes.) Making mistakes in beekeeping is literally how we learn. Two things are essential to gaining experience. First, you have to be willing to try things, and second, you have to take good notes, so you can learn from what works and what doesn't. I get so many calls from people who are afraid to try splits because they have never done splits. Read about splits, talk to your peers about doing splits, and then try doing splits, recording your method and what worked well. Try grafting. Experiment with overwintering nucs. Heck, try a Snelgrove board or two-queen systems or comb honey. If you have a bee yard with EFB, you get an opportunity to learn about how to manage bacterial disease. When you see it next time you'll be experienced, and you maybe can help a neighbor too. Remember, beekeeping is a life-long learning opportunity that is only learned through hands-on experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Special thank you to Dan Barry and Kay Wilson for taking the time to write out the system used in the Ann Arbor Backyard Beekeepers club, thank you to Charlotte Hubbard for her past work on developing mentor/mentee guidelines, and to Winn Harless, who teaches a great method of MI beekeeping.

Meghan Milbrath is a beekeeper and honey bee and pollinator researcher and Extension specialist at Michigan State University.

