

# Should I Get Honey Bees?

## Things to Consider

Beekeeping in Alberta has been around since the early 1900s, with the first honey bee colonies being established in southern Alberta. The rationing of sugar in the 1940s caused beekeeping to rise in popularity as people wanted their own supply of honey. In the 21st century, beekeeping is on the rise again, with the number of registered beekeepers in Alberta doubling in the last 10 years.

### So, are honey bees really the bee's knees?

**Short answer:** Yes, they are! This superorganism is extremely fascinating!

**Long answer:** It's complicated.

There are numerous factors to consider before deciding to keep honey bees. Why do you want to get honey bees? Do you have time to learn and care for your honey bees year-round? Are you prepared for the financial investment?



### Reasons to get honey bees

There are plenty of good reasons to keep honey bees. Many people find honey bees enjoyable to learn about and to work with, while others choose to keep bees for their products, such as honey and wax.

Keeping honey bees will not help 'save the bees.' The bees of concern are native pollinators, such as bumble bees, which are at risk due to habitat loss and pesticides. There are over 300 species of native bees in Alberta, most of which are solitary bees. The honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) is not native to Canada, having originally come from Europe as an agricultural species for honey production and pollination services. Additionally, there is evidence that honey bees can spread diseases to bumble bee populations if they are not managed properly.

Honey bee colony losses have been higher in recent years, but more colonies are not necessarily a helpful solution. Colony losses are often caused by diseases, pests, and poor foraging and weather conditions. Reducing colony losses is about proper seasonal management.

### If you want to support native pollinators, consider doing the following:

- Planting a variety of Alberta native flowering plants
- Create native bee nesting sites – bee hotels, bumblebee boxes
- Reduce pesticide use in gardens or farmland

More information on native pollinators and how to help them can be found through the [Alberta Native Bee Council](#) and [Pollinator Partnership Canada](#).

### Learning colony management

A honey bee colony cannot be put in your backyard and forgotten about. Honey bees have been domesticated and require management to survive and thrive. Therefore, it is important to do your research on their biology and care.

No "honey coating" it: beekeeping is challenging. Colony management is complex as it changes with the seasons. It takes a deep understanding of bee biology and behavior to know how to best care for them. It will

For more information, contact the Bee Health Assurance Team, [bee@gov.ab.ca](mailto:bee@gov.ab.ca)

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seem like the more you learn, the less you know. It takes many years to master beekeeping and you may fail several times along the way. So, it is best to be as prepared as possible.

Just like other animals, bees can get sick from a number of pests and diseases. As a beekeeper, you need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of pests and diseases, and how to treat or manage them accordingly. Organic beekeeping is not always going to be possible if your colony is suffering from certain pests and diseases. Additionally, organic beekeeping requires more intense monitoring to be effective. Honey bees should be treated like livestock. You would not let a sick animal suffer; you would treat it. The level of care that you provide your bees has a direct impact on their welfare.

Being a good beekeeper is not just about maintaining your bee's welfare. Unlike other livestock, bees have free range of the surrounding area, travelling up to 12 km away from the colony. Your honey bees are likely to encounter bees from surrounding colonies and can spread pests and diseases to them. Therefore, as a beekeeper, you have a responsibility to both your bees and the beekeeping community to provide quality care.

### Get Educated

It is strongly recommended to take a beekeeping course to better understand the management required. Better yet, after completing a course, find a mentor through a local beekeeping group that is willing to share their expertise and take you "under their wing."

## Time Commitment

The amount of time needed to care for a colony varies with the seasons. The more colonies a person has, the greater the time commitment. Depending on the time of year, a new beekeeper can expect to spend between 30 minutes to three hours tending to a colony per week. Ensure that you have the time to take on the responsibility of caring for a honey bee colony.

## The Cost of Beekeeping

The startup cost of beekeeping is substantial. In addition to the bees themselves, a beekeeper needs equipment for the colony, honey extraction, personal protection, and more. The colony alone can range

from \$200 to 500, depending on the size and what is included. Therefore, a new beekeeper can expect to spend several hundreds to thousands of dollars getting into beekeeping.

Honey bees can be purchased locally, nationally, or internationally. Only packaged bees and queens can be imported from international sources and are typically in good supply. International queens may have qualities of interest such as faster colony build-up or disease resistance. However, long distance transportation is very stressful for the bees and there is a higher risk of introducing new pests and diseases to Alberta.

The supply of local queens and nucleus colonies has been increasing in recent years. Purchasing locally reduces transportation stress and introduced pest and disease risk. Additionally, local bees are better adapted to our winter climate than international bees from warm climates. Bees purchased in Canada from outside of Alberta require an inspection and permit to be moved into or through the province. For more information, see the [Movement of bees and equipment](#) web page.

## Still Want Honey Bees?

Welcome to the beekeeping community! See our fact sheet on [purchasing honey bees or equipment in Alberta](#).

**Check out the Bee Health Assurance program website for resources on:**

- Beekeeping management
- Pest and disease documents
- Beekeeping groups, associations, and organizations
- And more!

**There are also some important things to know about owning honey bees:**

- Anyone owning bees or used beekeeping equipment or operating bees in Alberta is required to [register](#) annually with the [Provincial Apiculturist](#).
- Beekeepers need to have a [Premises Identification Number](#) (PID) to access medications for honey bee diseases and pests.
- Familiarize yourself with the provincial [Bee Act](#) and its [Regulation](#)
- Follow municipal legislation for keeping bees in your area

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