

Keeping Top Bar Hives - by Dan Putnam

My interest in beekeeping was sparked last spring while working at Bollings Air Force Base in Washington, DC. I watched a swarm of bees fly across my job site. A month or so later I met a guy whose father is a beekeeper in Cecil County. We struck up a conversation and I was invited to visit a few times and observe him while working the hives. Those visits along with lots of web research had me hooked.

By late summer, I was giving serious thought to trying my hand at beekeeping. There were a lot of unanswered questions and a bit of nervousness about bringing home and raising something that can sting you or a member of your family. I remember thinking, what if my then 4 year old daughter was allergic to bees? Then I found out one of our neighbors has kept bees for years. I went and introduced myself to this man and it was like we had known each other for years. He was really easy going, showing me his bees and offering plenty of advice and experiences. After that meeting I knew I was going to do this.



Knowing I had a lot to learn about beekeeping; I got some books from the library, joined a few forums and did more web research. While doing this I stumbled upon a type of hive called a Top Bar Hive (TBH). I was curious about this type as it was different from anything I had ever seen or heard. The search was on to find websites/forums specifically about this type of hive. I discovered that it was nothing more than wooden cavity with a lid and movable wooden bars for the bees to build comb from. They were being used successfully in both warm and cold climates. The best part is it can be built for less than \$20.00 and with very little building experience.

At that point, I decided that if I was going to go forward with this, the TBH was an easy way to get started without a lot of investment. I found a few plans on the internet, bought materials and began building. On April 28, after building two hives and getting the area selected for them ready, I received two packages of bees. This was the defining moment. Could I get the bees settled in the hives, but not get stung too many times?

Well, I achieved one of the two goals. They were settled in their hives, all alive and well. Both queens were released within one day and all looked good. Unfortunately, I did not escape being stung a few times during the install. Over the next few weeks, I feed them lots of syrup and waited to see what they would do. The abundance of rain that occurred this spring may have slowed their activity, but, they took full advantage of what good weather we had.



Within 50 days, the first hive had built out 18 bars of natural comb and the second hive had built out 16 bars (A bar is about the same size as frame used in a deep super). It was an awesome thing to see how fast they could build out the hive. Then the most unexpected thing happened, I realized that the first hive was getting ready to swarm. I did not believe this would happen within the first year, much less the first two months, but I saw an opportunity to do a split and create another hive.

Unfortunately, I was unable to get the third hive built before they swarmed. Of course, I was at work when it happened, didn't even get to see the swarm. According to an eyewitness account from my neighbor, the swarming was a pretty cool thing to watch. They said a giant ball of bees flowed out of the hive and up into the trees. This all occurred the day before I was to pick up a Russian Queen cell.

All was not lost. The swarm left behind 8 nice capped queen cells, lots of bees and a lot of capped brood. My neighbor and I were able to start a couple of nucs (1 Lang style and 1 TBH) from the swarm cells. I put the Russian queen cell in the hive that swarmed with the remaining bees, where she emerged later that day. Unfortunately she did not do so well, but I was able to buy a mated queen from Joe a few weeks later so it all worked.

Recently, my 5 year old daughter has become very involved in learning about beekeeping. She decided that she wanted to take bees to her school for show and tell, an interesting idea. So my wife and I collected 4 drone bees and small piece of comb from the hives and set them up in her Hello Kitty bug carrier for her to take to school with some pictures of the hives. Needless to say, the other kids loved it. They were fearless, asked lots of questions and even held the bees in their hands. It was an awesome experience for everyone.

This has been by far one of the most enjoyable hobbies I've ever had. I'd like to thank the club for providing the beekeeping class and being there for support when needed. --- Dan