



The British Beekeepers' Association

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BBKA Standard and Guidance Notes for Nuclei

These notes are based on British Standard BS 1372 (Bees: Colonies and Nuclei), first produced in 1947 and withdrawn in 1984. When this BS was first drafted advice was taken from:

- BBKA, SBKA, WBKA, Apis Club, Min. of Agriculture and Fisheries (now DEFRA), Rothamsted, HPA and Beekeeping Appliance Makers.

These notes are derived from the original BS document brought up to date, together with general advice from the BBKA. As such, this represents the best available definition of a 'nucleus' and how to manage it.

1. Introduction.

The purpose of BS 1372 was to provide both buyers and sellers with a sensible standard for the sale of nuclei.

This standard concentrated on nuclei, simply because the majority will probably be purchased by beginners, and due to their inexperience they will need guidance on what to expect. Since bees are living things and breeding conditions/weather varies, there may be good reasons for the occasional slight departure from the standard.

If you expect to buy a nucleus to these standards then you must ask the seller before agreeing to buy if it complies with the "BBKA Standard". If not, then there may be a good reason why and the buyer may have a difficult decision to make.

Bees are often in short supply very early in the season, and it may be tempting to buy something you may regret, when a few weeks of patience may be well rewarded.

For practical purposes this standard is only applicable to a nucleus supplied between early May-end August.

2. Definition

A nucleus is a well balanced colony between 3-5 British Standard brood combs. It should have bees, food, brood, and a queen as defined below. The total number of combs should be stated. For bees on other sizes of frames the buyer and seller should reach agreement.

A nucleus should be in a position to expand as soon as purchased. It is not just the number of bees, but the state of the queen and her relationship to the quantity and age of the brood that is important.

3. Combs and frames

The frames should be securely nailed/pinned and be in sound order. They need not be new. Combs should be fully built out, i.e. not foundation sheets. The outside combs can be food only, especially on the outside faces. There should be no sacrificial drone comb.

4. Queen

There should be a current or previous season's UK-reared laying queen, and she should have produced all the brood. If the queen is older this should be stated to the buyer. She should be marked with the 'standard' colour for the year although it may not be reliable to assume the colour marking will comply with the convention. Her wings may be clipped at the request of the purchaser

5. Brood

Brood and eggs in all stages shall occupy at least half the total comb area, with no brood cycle break. Not less than 30% of the total comb area shall be sealed brood. No more than 5% of the total comb area shall be drone brood. There should be no evidence of laying workers. There should be no queen cells of any type.

6. Food

It must be accepted that the food situation of a nucleus can vary considerably. A couple of weeks of poor weather could mean a shortage, but a week's good weather could mean congestion, and the queen being crowded out. Ideally a nucleus should have enough food for at least two weeks after purchase, without any coming in. The brood chamber shall contain in total not less than the equivalent 1 ¼ lb (680 gm) per comb of honey and be well-provisioned with pollen.

7. Bees

There should be a good balance of young and flying bees, and the frames should be fully covered. There may be a varying number of drones depending on conditions. They should be good tempered when handled by a competent handler in suitable conditions.

8. Health

The brood should be healthy and not show any signs of disease in any stage. Purchasers are advised to check with their RBI in respect of Foul Brood diseases if there is any cause for concern. A small number of cells showing chalk brood is acceptable, as this can depend on prevailing weather conditions.

In the adult bees there should be no obvious signs of acarine, nosema or damaged wings (possibly due to deformed wing virus). No *Varroa* mites should be visible on the adult bees. The supplier should state the *Varroa* treatments/therapies that have been applied to the nucleus.

9. Instructions to the purchaser

If your nucleus is sourced locally and the seller is able to help you then there is no need for instructions, but if the seller is unable to help then a set of clear hiving and care instructions should be provided.

10. Other considerations

10.1. General

It must be accepted that some commercial suppliers may not be able to comply with some of the above for good reasons and that the structure of the nucleus may vary. These variations may include such things as:

- the nucleus is made up of bees and brood from several different colonies,
- that the queen is not responsible for all the brood present,
- that the queen is caged (not in the brood) and/or not yet proven/mated,
- the nucleus may be the result of a swarm control manipulation, rather than part of a managed queen/nucleus creation programme.

All of these variations must be declared before the purchase takes place and, while they are legitimate forms of nucleus, are not recommended for the beginner or inexperienced beekeeper.

Whatever the state of the nucleus, a complete set of instructions on how to bring it into a productive state equivalent to that implied by the BS should be included.

The supplier should also be able to state what treatments have been administered to the nucleus and when. There is a legal requirement to record all medications applied to food-producing animals and therefore it is reasonable to ask for this information so you have a record. Make sure all applied treatments are legal as any residues of illegal substances in honey and wax will be your responsibility once the bees are yours.

10.2. Container

A nucleus sourced locally may be in a nucleus or travelling box, but expect a commercially sourced nucleus to have a temporary non returnable container. Be sure that you and the seller agree on what equipment is either to be returned or replaced with equivalent new items (e.g. frames).

If the bees are confined for more than a few hours they should have ample ventilation, and water or weak sugar solution sprayed or dribbled on them regularly through the ventilation holes.

10.3. Transportation

Bees suffer stress when confined and being moved, so to minimise this make the journey as short as possible. It would be preferable to collect rather than be delivered by a carrier, who may not treat with care, or who might cover up ventilation holes, allow the bees to get overheated, or delay delivery.

If you collect make sure you treat them gently and do not keep them in a hot car or in full sun.

10.4. Complaints

A nucleus can change character very quickly therefore any complaints should be lodged within a few days. Inexperienced buyers would do well to seek guidance from an experienced beekeeper when transferring a nucleus to a full hive and this is where early contact with a local BKA is invaluable. If there are any problems then take photographs and notes as early as possible. Please remember it is unfair to make a complaint if a fault has been created after delivery.

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