

Natural (Holistic) Beekeeping

Natural beekeeping is a phrase often used to describe many different approaches to beekeeping. While there's not one agreed-upon definition, our definition of natural beekeeping is minimal manipulation, natural combs (no foundation), and no medication (chemical treatments).

Michael Bush

Natural (Holistic) Beekeeping

Michael Bush describes a bee colony as “a living organism” with thousands of beneficial bacteria as well as many mites other than Varroa. These mites have unknown but seemingly harmless, possible beneficial contributions to the balance of the colonies eco system.

Therefore a natural balance is the most desirable state to achieve within a bee colony.

Though desirable it may be difficult to achieve without a high cost, both monetarily and physically.

Natural (Holistic) Beekeeping

1. What is Natural Beekeeping?

2. What is the Difference between Treatment Free and Natural Beekeeping?

3. What are the advantages to Natural Beekeeping?

4. What are the hazards of Natural Beekeeping?

5. What is the scale limits the Natural venue?

Natural Beekeeping

Is the practice of raising and maintaining bees in a natural environment without intervention.

This may include allowing the hive to die out in an effort to breed a survivor stock.

This also includes no use of anything not natural to the hive such as feeding anything but what they produce or gather themselves.

Friedrich Nietzsche quotation: "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." May not be the rule to successful beekeeping.

Natural Beekeeping

This also includes not introducing foundation within the frames. They must be encouraged to draw natural comb. Small cell nature comb being the most desirable.

It is believed but not totally proven that the small cell structure helps in controlling Varroa mites.

No combining of hives to save a hive. This would interfere with the natural selection within the apiary.

All queens must be produced within the apiary to insure the integrity of the apiary stock.

Hive types or construction is also viewed as important to the hive developing naturally. Such as Top Bar Hives.

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What is the Difference between Treatment Free and Natural Beekeeping?

Natural Beekeeping and Treatment Free approaches share many of the same schools of thought as well as tools and applications.

Where the natural beekeeping processes exclude chemical treatments as a part of the many requirements, treatment free only embraces this one concept.

The Treatment Free approach stems from the Organic honey concept and a form of natural beekeeping.

What is the Difference between Treatment Free and Natural Beekeeping?

Treatment Free hives want to use some methods of natural beekeeping but focus on non-introduction of chemicals within the hive.

Organic does not mean that the final crop or product is free from toxic chemical contaminants according to Ross Conrad in his book (Natural Beekeeping).

This is only a marketing ploy to degrade the purity of other beekeepers honey and sell their own.

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What are the advantages to Natural Beekeeping?

The most prevalent advantage is the respect that is given to the bees in the keepers non-intervention approach.

Sometimes we hug our hives to death.

Knowing the severity of the threats facing bees the natural approach may not be possible for most beekeepers.

The natural beekeeping approach is by far the most desirable in the relationship to bees, the keepers expenses, labor and stress may not be the most desirable approach for most hobby beekeepers.

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What are the hazards of Natural Beekeeping?

The most prominent hazard is Hive Loss. Most natural and treatment free beekeepers are expected to see 1/3 of their colonies die out each year.

The main focus is to bring about a survivor stock.

A good meaning theory but may be too costly, labor intensive and time consuming. But they are your hives.

I am sure in some years the number of hives lost may vary up or down.

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What is the scale limits the Natural venue?

The limits are what you are willing to risk to achieve a natural state and environment within your apiary.

Mainly hives being lost to pests and diseases before you reach your goal. Being an honorable goal it may not be acceptable for most keepers.

A survivor stock may be a misnomer in that the reason the hive survived may not be the bees. The environment they live in is the most important factor to survival though both are important.

1. What is Natural Beekeeping?

In some aspects we do rely on natural approaches concerning many applications within our beekeeping tasks.

Structure of the hive arrangement.

Use of natural drawn comb.

Survivor stock.

Spacing of frames.

Control of Pests.

Control of Disease.

Lack of intervention.

Supplemental feeding.









Structure of the hive arrangement.

There are several examples of hive structures applying to natural beekeeping.

1. Most simple is limiting hive width.
Using 5 frame equipment with deep frames.
Stacking a number of hive bodies with winter super on top configured much as a tree feral hive would be.
2. Use of placement of hives and natural forces.
Some studies surrounding harmonic bands within the earth.
3. Using one size equipment for expense and to resemble a more natural hive and more economical.

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Use of natural drawn comb.

In Michael Bush's book (The Practical Beekeeper Beekeeping Naturally) he believes that natural drawn comb is structured with smaller cells that helps in varroa mite control.

He also believes that wax drawn by the hive bees and not introduced foundation helps control any outside contaminants from being introduced into the colony.

The one draw back to natural drawn comb is the fragility of the comb. It takes time for it to toughen up. On a hot day you may ruin frames by handling them like foundation frames which have wire in them.

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Survivor stock.

Survivor Stock is the main focus to solve many threats within your hive and apiary. Sometimes survivor stock is a misnomer in my opinion.

Good hive practices and a more natural environment may be the answer and not the stock.

No one piece of equipment or single practice will bring about the BALANCE you may desire to achieve. Balance being the main word. It is the constant flux within the hive that has brought most beekeepers to where they are today in a dead spiral. Over treating bees and killing them in the process.

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Spacing of Frames.

I go back to Michael Bush in his theory the spacing of frames. He states that 1 ¼ wide frames have many advantages and is more like the natural comb produced in a feral hive.

The frames you purchase commercially would have to be altered or just make your own.

Through rotating frames out until you have attained a small cell structure. This can be costly in honey production.

Spacing of Frames.

These are the advantages he lists in his book “The Practical Beekeeper Beekeeping Naturally”.

Less Drone comb. Of course the bees are going to do what they want to do in spite of our efforts.

More frames of brood in the hive.

Brood can be covered and warmed by more bees being that the space is one bee deep instead of two. Reducing the void between the frames.

According to some research on the 70's in Russia, there was less Nosema.

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Natural Beekeeping's main focus is to bring about a balance within the hive thereby producing healthier bees that need no chemicals to fight off disease and pests.

We compare feral bees with what we want our hives to become.

If we can achieve this delicate balance the bees can hopefully control the rest.

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Lack of intervention and swarm control

In Natural Beekeeping minimal if not total non-intervention is required.

The white knuckle theory comes into play. Any intervention may throw the whole concept out of balance skewing the results causing failure.

Treatment free beekeeping is another venue, it is not set to achieve a balance but to be kinder to the bees bringing them into a healthier state and to have Organic Honey.

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Supplemental feeding is confined to what naturally occurs as a byproduct of the hive. In other words you must feed their honey back to them. Sugar syrup because of its PH level helps promote several brood and hive diseases.

AFB , EFB ,Chalkbrood as well as Nosema are assisted by the high PH. Honey is 3.2 to4.5. Sugar syrup is 6.0. All these diseases reproduce more readily with the high PH.

Manipulating the PH with Ascorbic acid (vitamin C) is helpful. Vinegar may be used but the smell may bring on robbing.

Supplemental feeding.

Pollen substitutes are questionable in a natural apiary. If you collect natural pollen and make your own patties from it, it is no longer a substitute. If a natural pollen is available they will avoid any substitute.

The one drawback to patties is Hive Beetles breeding. Hive Beetles will thrive on these patties. If the bees are ignoring the patty take it out or only add $\frac{1}{2}$ a patty at a time so they consume it quickly.

Getting the hive beetle free or to a comfortable level is the first step.

**Thank you for
your labor and
Interest in
Beekeeping.**