

The mandate of the Ontario Bee Breeders' Association (OBBA) is to encourage and support Ontario beekeepers in their production of high quality queens, queen cells and nucs through education and practical support.

Are you buying nucs this spring?

Be aware of what to expect.

A 'nuc', or nucleus colony of bees, is the most common way for hobbyists, sideliners, and commercial beekeepers to purchase a hive of honey bees.

A nuc generally consists of a queen, 2 or more frames of brood, a frame of feed and an empty frame or frame of foundation that gives the bees space to cluster. A nuc can vary in the total number of frames (brood, feed and empty), the age of the queen and the type of shipping box. Ontario nucs are most often sold with 4 frames in an enclosed, easily transportable box.

The OBBA's standard for a 4 frame nuc is as follows:

- Queen bee
- 2 frames of brood, ½ to ⅔ capped, with adhering bees
- 1 frame of feed with adhering bees
- 1 frame of foundation/empty comb
- Extra bees to ensure the brood will be kept warm

The International Queen Colour Code is:

WHITE for years ending in 1 or 6
YELLOW for years ending in 2 or 7
RED for years ending in 3 or 8
GREEN for years ending in 4 or 9
BLUE for years ending in 5 or 0

Many beekeepers adhere to this definition of a nuc but there is still wide variation. So ask questions! Know what you should expect.

1. Are the brood frames capped?

Two frames of mostly capped brood, versus two frames of eggs and larvae will make a huge difference to how fast your nuc takes off. A good nuc, when made up by the producer with approximately ½ to ⅔ of the brood capped, should produce surplus honey in an average year if it is established on drawn comb. Be aware that if there is a delay in pick-up or installation, the capped brood may begin to hatch.

2. How old is the queen? Is the queen Ontario stock? Or Imported?

A nuc will usually have a queen mated the previous summer; ideally the daughter of a queen selected for traits such as hygienic behavior, honey production and bred for local conditions. Ask your Queen and Nuc producer whether they have a formal breeding program established. Many nuc producers will mark their queens with the colour of the year, in order to date the queen and allow for easy queen identification.

3. Is it a spring nuc or a summer nuc?

A spring nuc is available throughout the month of May into early June and will consist of an overwintered queen on her own brood. In this respect, the queen has already proven to be a good layer and has survived her first winter with no problems. A summer nuc is one sold mid June and after and will generally have a newly mated queen, possibly boosted with brood from other hives.

4. What is the cost? Does it include the shipping box?

A spring nuc with capped brood and a queen from selected Ontario Breeders participating in the OBA Breeding Program will demand top price. Would you pay as much for a spring nuc made up of random brood and an imported queen? There may also be a drop in prices for summer nucs, which must be helped by the beekeeper through their first summer and winter, along with the associated costs. Although it's possible for them to produce honey their first year, they may not be strong enough to produce a surplus crop until their second summer. You may be able to request extra frames of brood, but expect an added cost. Also, find out whether the cost of the shipping box is included in the price as some nuc producers have returnable wooden boxes.

Any beekeeper selling queens and nucs is required to have a **Queen and Nuc Permit** from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. This ensures that your queen and nuc producer is regularly inspected and is not spreading diseases such as American Foulbrood. The nuc box or paperwork should have an attached Queen and Nuc permit sticker.

All first time beekeepers are encouraged to take a hands-on workshop before jumping in to beekeeping. Workshops are offered by the OBA Tech-Transfer Program, the University of Guelph, as well as some experienced beekeepers.