

Taking a Swarm A Beginner's Guide

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Many beginners put their name down for a swarm to get started and may be lucky enough to be given one by a more experienced beekeeper. Others may be tempted to try to take one by themselves, it did dawn on me that it can be a bit daunting to take your first swarm, at least when you don't know what to do and when the people who have reported the swarm are often shut up safe inside, with doors and windows tightly closed — not that you can blame them, as the sky has been filled with stinging insects – and now you are expected to deal with the problem. But hopefully, when you arrive, the bees are nicely clustering on a low bush.

Firstly I will state what I think you will need.

Most important is a **BOX** to put the swarm in: a large skep is normally OK, or a strong cardboard box will do. If you use a cardboard box, it's safest to reinforce the bottom by pushing a couple of sticks or canes through from the outside and taping them in place (remember that the bottom of the box not only has to take the weight of the bees if you knock them down into it, but that it also becomes the roof of the box when it is inverted over the caught swarm, so that's where the bees will cluster – and, if it's a large swarm, its weight can make a weak roof collapse). I also recommend taping up the bottom flaps, both to keep them out of the way and as an additional means of strengthening the box. Above all, it's absolutely essential to provide plenty of air holes. Remember: a 3lb swarm, containing about 5,000 bees, requires a similar amount of air as an animal of that size. After I once lost a prime swarm through suffocation in a skep, I have now made my own swarm box with perforated zinc each side. Whatever you choose, it's a good thing to keep using the same box: if used before, it smells of bees.

You will also need a **BRUSH** (any soft brush will do – a dustpan brush is ideal), a pair of **SECATEURS**, your **SMOKER** (that impresses the people indoors, if you have to light up), a **SHEET** or preferably a **NET CURTAIN** large enough to wrap the box in to get it to your **CAR**, a pair of **GLOVES** (HD Marigold-type are ideal; cotton- or flock-lined are best, as they are easier to put on and remove) and of course your **VEIL**. A water bottle with a spray can be useful.

A swarm is normally not bothered with anyone and is only interested in finding a site for a new home – in fact they are normally in holiday spirit – but, if they have been there for several days, they can be a bit tetchy.

The swarm may be 40ft up a tree, in a chimney or in an airbrick leading into a cavity; if you are lucky, it may be just in a tree or bush a few feet off the ground. To take a swarm in a tree, clear away any twigs or branches underneath with your cutters (get permission first); if it's in a chimney or the bees are going into a wall, *etc*, suggest a private pest control company if the homeowners really want them removed. Unless you know what you are doing, do not be tempted to take risks and go up a high tree, *etc*.

Most people do not know the difference between a wasp, a bumblebee and a honeybee. If the bees are in or under a shed, in the ground or in a compost bin, they are normally bumbles (though I have taken honeybees from the lids of compost bins). So, when you're speaking on the phone to the people who have reported the swarm, try to establish that they are in fact honeybees.

If they're bumbles, try to convince them that it's best to leave them there and that the bees will die out in late summer; point out that only the mated queens hibernate and that there are normally only about 50 bees in a nest; mention that bumbles are having problems just surviving and can do with as much help as they can get (badgers and foxes are the worst for destroying nests of bumblebees) and that they only sting if you pick them up. If they agree, thank them for their interest in conservation.

If they are honeybees, here's how to take the swarm. Spread the sheet or piece of net curtain on the ground close by; have a piece of wood or a stick ready. If the swarm is in a tree or bush, hold the box under the swarm and shake or brush the branch until most of the bees are inside the box. Carry the box over to the sheet and turn it upside down, lay a piece of wood or stick flat propping up one edge to allow the bees access in or out. If you take the swarm during the day, do shade it from the hot sun. It is always best to leave the boxed swarm until the evening so all the flying bees will be inside. If you're going to leave it and come back later to collect it, do make sure the queen is in the box before leaving: if she is, the bees will be fanning at the box entrance to call the stray bees in. If you take a swarm in the evening, just wait until the bees are inside, then gather the sheet/netting around the box and carry it straight to the car; move the sheet down from the sides to let plenty of air in the box. If you have to remove them right away and before they can settle down, they will be roaring and hyperventilating and will need a lot more air.

At times the swarm is perhaps on a post or on a wooden or chain-link fence. In that case, just put your sheet on the ground below them, then shake, brush or use your hands to get them on the sheet, then put the box over them (not forgetting the stick to prop up one edge). If they are in a dense, well-clipped hedge, then put your box above them and drive them up into it by lightly smoking them. Often, after removing a swarm from a fence or tree, quite a lot of bees start to re-cluster where the swarm was – a good smoking will get them flying again and they should then all go into the box with the queen.

Swarms should be hived in the evening. When you get the swarm back to your apiary, have the hive set up with frames of fresh foundation. There are 2 main ways to put the bees in the hive:

1. place a piece of plywood or similar (not too smooth a surface) sloping up to the hive entrance, then shake the bees onto the ply sheet – they will march up the slope into the hive
2. remove half the frames from the hive, bump or shake the bees into the vacant space, then carefully put the frames back. If you know that the swarm issued from disease-free stock, you can give them a feed; if not, wait a couple of days before feeding: if there is any disease in the honey they have brought with them, it will be used to draw out foundation and not stored.