Starting a New Honeybee Colony via a Nucleus Hive

Receiving Your Nucs -
Thank you for your support of the CMBA Nuc Program. We think you will be pleased with your choice in getting a nuc to start a new hive. Please read this article in its entirety. The success of your nucs depends in part on your understanding the points presented here.

1-2 Days Ahead of Time -
You will need to consider the following a number of days before you pick up your bees. All are discussed in detail below, but you can use this section as a check list:
- Liquid feed for the bees
- A feeding method prepared and available
- Hive transport closure - Not the same as an entrance reducer!
- A ratchet strap if you are transporting in your own equipment. DO NOT arrive with bungee cords. They are not secure.

Nucleus Colony Arrival -
The nucleus colonies will arrive in MD in cardboard nuc transport boxes, each holding 5 frames. At the pickup point (location to be announced), you can transfer the 5 frames directly into your own equipment. Make sure to bring 5 extra frames to fully fill the box. Then close it up and take it home. Or, you may have purchased the cardboard transport box in which the bees are arriving. If so, you can take the bees home in that and do the transfer at home yourself. The cardboard boxes are non-returnable, but you will find them useful.

If you are bringing your own equipment you will need two things: Something to fully close the entrance, and a ratchet strap. DO NOT bring bungee cords. They do not hold hives together and you may find a car full of bees and a lost colony. Rope works only if you know what a Trucker's Hitch is. If you have to look that up, don't. Get a ratchet strap. You'll be happier in the long run.

To close the entrance you can use foam carpet backing cut to the right length, or the stripped out filter material from the inside of an air furnace filter, available at any hardware store. Unless you have the hive on a screened bottom board, the closure material must breathe or you risk suffocating the bees. The closure material should be cut carefully before you come, as any creases or hasty work will allow bees to escape in your car. Take time to prepare this and your trip home will be a non-event - just what you want. Duct tape will work but you will lose bees stuck to it, one of which could be the queen. Obviously, if you understand the concept there are ways to manage well while coming up with your own solutions. We are simply giving guidelines and “best practices”.

Regardless of which transport method is used, reopen the entrance as soon as the bees are in the location they will be staying in.

Technically, it is Ok if the frames remain in the cardboard box for a day or two, but position the transport box in the exact location the standard gear will be in when the frames are finally transferred. That way, as the bees fly during the day, they will return easily to the location and into the wooden box as soon as you make that switch and move the wooden box to the old location of the cardboard box. The rule of thumb in moving bees: No more
that 6” or less than 3 miles, nothing in between.

**When to Transfer the Frames -**
It is best to transfer the frames to your own equipment in the late afternoon/evening. That way the bees stay in the new equipment overnight, and there is less likelihood of the group absconding. Start with only 10 frames (the 5 that contain the bees and 5 others, to both sides of a single box). Once the bees are filling 8-9 frames, you can add the second box. The point is to force them to build out and fill the empty frames.

**Transferring Frames -**
Have on hand a hand sprayer set to a fine spray filled with a light (1:1 or lighter) sugar syrup. Open your own equipment first and remove at least two frames. Place the nuc transport box near your equipment. Open the nuc transport box, and lightly spray the bees on the frame tops. Then remove the frames carefully and place them into the center of your home equipment. Replace the empty frames you removed to each side of the 5 frames holding the bees. Invert the transport nuc box above the home gear and give it a few sharp raps to dislodge the remaining bees. Look carefully to make sure the queen has not been left in the transport box. Again spray the frame tops in the home equipment lightly with sugar water and close the box. Leave the cardboard transport box touching the home equipment if there are many stragglers. They will find their way into the new hive.

**What to Look For After Installation -**
Generally, once the bees are installed in the permanent equipment, you should not open the box for a number of days. Make sure they are flying, make sure they are fed, and leave them alone to establish their home. After a week, you can remove frames and look for new larvae, a sure sign the queen is laying as she should be.

**Feeding -**
The nuc colony must be fed, and feeding wants to be continuous until it is time to stop. As soon as the bees are home and in your own equipment, start feeding them. This means you will need to buy or make a feeder. There are various types on the market, the cheapest being a Boardman feeder (various) that slides in the front entrance of a standard hive body. If you have extra empty supers, you can put an empty super above the inner cover and use a canning jar as a feeder. Piece the metal lid with an ice pick a number of times, fill the bottle with the sugar syrup and invert the bottle partially covering the hole in the inner cover. Put the outer cover on top of the empty super, covering the bottle. Better is to place the bottle on two slips of wood 3/8” thick to raise the bottle. That way the bees can come under it from multiple directions. In any case, check the feeder daily to make sure they do not run out. Feed for either two weeks or until there is a good dandelion bloom in your area, whichever is the longer.

**What to Feed -**
A 1:1 sugar syrup is good at this time of year. It doesn't need to be exact, and can be 1:1 by volume, i.e. measure both sugar and water with a measuring cup. Using 1/2 the volume of hot water, you can get the sugar to dissolve easily, adding cold water later to get the right mixture and cool the mix.

**General Management Going Forward -**
After two weeks, you can assume the colony is established, at home. From this point on you can start whatever you consider general management. The biggest difference between a nuc and packaged bees is speed. The nuc will grow very quickly, so you need to be aware and add equipment as necessary to avoid swarming. Swarming is rarely a problem with packaged bees, but nucs can outrun the equipment if the beekeeper is not watching.

For further information or questions, write info@centralmarylandbees.org