

# Honey Production

## Introduction

Beekeeping can be a valuable source of supplementary income in favoured regions in the county. At the present time there are about 2,000 beekeepers in Ireland managing 22,000 colonies of bees. The outlook for beekeeping is good especially with the REPS scheme in operation and a more positive attitude to preserving and retaining natural flora that the honeybee exploits to gather the honey crop.

It is important that any prospective beekeeper should take part in a beekeeping course before commencing. This will give the novice beekeeper the confidence, practical experience and skills necessary to successfully manage a beekeeping enterprise. Beekeeping is a craft with a gradual learning curve, i.e. start small and expand gradually. The site of the apiary should be located away from areas that people use. The apiary should be fenced to ensure that animals do not disturb or knock over the beehives. Shelter is also important and of course adequate flora to enable the bees to forage for nectar and pollen. There are many sources of nectar and pollen available to the bee colony e.g. sycamore, horse chestnut, blackthorn, whitethorn, dandelion, blackberry, white clover, knapweed, heather and many others. Bees with access to heather and knapweed have an additional source of nectar in August and September. In some areas oilseed rape and field beans are grown as a break crop and these also are a valuable source of nectar.

## Market

Irish honey is derived from a multi nectar source, giving it a deep rich flavour and texture which allows it to be regarded as a superior product. Irish honey properly prepared and presented is a premium product, which commands a good price. Imported honey on the other hand is mainly produced from single source nectars, which lacks flavour but nutritionally should be as good as Irish. It can be marketed in bulk to a processor, directly to shops or sold from the producer's house. The preparation and presentation of the honey is of vital importance so as to ensure that the product appeals to the purchaser. In this regard proper honey jars and an attractive label enhance an already superb product.

The production of comb honey is another area that the beekeeper could explore and this is a market that is under utilised at present. Perhaps producing some comb honey in conjunction with the conventional extracted honey would be a good marketing ploy. The honey offered for sale should be properly strained and it is good practice to visit the shop regularly when the honey is on sale and replace any jars that have started to granulate.

## Production Methods

The aim of the beekeeper should be to manage the bee colonies so as to have the maximum population of bees in the hive to coincide with the start of the main honey flow period. This will vary with the location within the country but for the majority of Irish beekeepers will be from mid-June to the end of July.



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*This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.*

*All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website  
[www.teagasc.ie](http://www.teagasc.ie)*

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Obviously, the prevailing weather conditions will have a big influence on the honey crop obtained, but the skill of the beekeeper in ensuring that a large population of bees are present during this period will determine if the enterprise is successful or not. There are many types of beehives available on the Irish market. However, the National type of beehive is the principal one used in this country. Detailed drawings of the National, Commercial and Smith hives are published in the booklet “Profitable Honey Production” available from Teagasc. The hives should be placed on some type of stand to keep them up off the ground to make for easier management.

It is imperative that the beekeeper keeps records of the hive performance. This will allow an evaluation of the colonies and as the enterprise develops a programme of selection and improvement can be part of the management. It is important to start with a healthy and productive strain of bee. The best approach is to contact a reputable beekeeper in the area for assistance in obtaining the bees. This is a more reliable way than depending on stray swarms.

The beekeeper will have to ensure that the bee colony has an adequate food supply in the hive at all times. In this regard it is necessary to feed bees with sugar syrup any time that food reserves are low from April to September when the winter-feeding takes place.

Swarming is the natural method of propagation that bees employ to continue the development of the species. While this swarming instinct cannot be suppressed entirely, it can be controlled. This is sometimes the most difficult aspect that the beekeeper has to deal with because if the colony swarms then he will have very little surplus honey to market. Consequently a good understanding of the factors that encourage swarming is necessary.

Beekeeping as in any enterprise has a number of diseases, which with good management the beekeeper can control or eliminate. The most serious one at the present time is Varroasis, which has only in recent times become established in this country. However, it can be controlled and it should not deter any prospective beekeeper. Also, proper protective clothing is necessary to reduce the risk of stings. This will consist of bee veil, white overalls, gloves, hive tool and smoker and proper boots. There are no grants available currently.

### Returns:

The South-East is reputed as the area giving consistently good yields, the main nectar sources being Clover and Blackberry. The capital costs of setting up a beekeeping enterprise can be high if the intending beekeeper purchases the hives at catalogue prices. It is much cheaper if manufactured by the beekeeper whilst ensuring that the specifications are met.

Hive Costs		Annual Costs	
	Price	Feeding	€20 per Hive
New	€200	Disease Control	
DIY Assembled	€140	Repair of Hives	
Annual Honey Returns			
Price	Yields		
	15 Kg.	20 Kg.	25 Kg.
Bulk Price €4 per Kg.	€60	€80	€100
Jars €6 per Kg.	€90	€120	€150