



Top-Bar Beekeeping: Organic Practices for Honeybee Health

Les Crowder, Heather Harrell

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In recent years beekeepers have had to face tremendous challenges, from pests such as varroa and tracheal mites and from the mysterious but even more devastating phenomenon known as Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). Yet in backyards and on rooftops all over the world, bees are being raised successfully, even without antibiotics, miticides, or other chemical inputs. More and more organically minded beekeepers are now using top-bar hives, in which the shape of the interior resembles a hollow log. Long lasting and completely biodegradable, a topbar hive made of untreated wood allows bees to build comb naturally rather than simply filling prefabricated foundation frames in a typical box hive with added supers.

Top-bar hives yield slightly less honey but produce more beeswax than a typical Langstroth box hive. Regular hive inspection and the removal of old combs helps to keep bees healthier and naturally disease-free.

Top-Bar Beekeeping provides complete information on hive management and other aspects of using these innovative hives. All home and hobbyist beekeepers who have the time and interest in keeping bees intensively should consider the natural, low-stress methods outlined in this book. It will also appeal to home orchardists, gardeners, and permaculture practitioners who look to bees for pollination as well as honey or beeswax.

Top-Bar Beekeeping: Organic Practices for Honeybee Health Details

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rose says

I agree with one of the other reviewers that this book is a 5 star for practicing beekeepers and a 3 star for brand-new ones. I tried to use it when installing a hive for the first time this spring and found it pretty unhelpful (and I'm in the second year of a Certified Beekeeper course). That being said, the writing style is extremely accessible and the information is highly useful...once you've practiced beekeeping a little bit.

Susan says

I didn't plan to "read" this book. I thought I'd just skip around, pick up a few tidbits, learn what the difference was between the different types of beehives. But, I read it cover to cover. Of course, the book is first and foremost a how-to on beekeeping, but it also tells, in a very approachable and engaging style, why organic beekeeping is important, how those of us who don't keep bees can still support bees and beekeepers (and not just by buying their products), and about how bees live. Includes a list of bee-friendly plants and trees that anyone can include in the landscape, too.

Aleksandar Jankovi? says

It's incredible how much useful information can fit into just 150 pages, complete with closeup color photos that leave no doubts about what the author is describing. Combs, brood, larvae, workers, drones, queens, top bar arrangements... I have a clear idea of how each of these look and how they interact with one another.

Les has over 30 years years in beekeeping, and it shows. This is the 4th book I've read on natural beekeeping and is the one I found the most useful for starting up my own top bar hives. There's some information I'm not yet ready for (queen raising), so I see myself coming back to this book in the years to come. Highly recommended if you are interested in chemical-free beekeeping, and particularly top bar hives.

Scott Knight says

This is my favorite beekeeping book I have read to date. It is simply fantastic! I am in my first year of beekeeping as a hobbyist. I have listened to and read huge amounts of material and did not want to start down a path of treating my bees as a commercial crop that can be replaced at my whim. This book is very focused on natural, chemical-free beekeeping in a way that is good for the bees and only slightly less convenient for the beekeeper. It has a wealth of information for top-bar beekeeping, but as other reviews have made clear it is not a first year how to start a top bar book. However, any information that is missing for beginning beekeepers can likely be found with a quick search of the internet. I enjoyed the author's approach to beekeeping because it matches my desires of keeping bees for the betterment of the species, the planet, and moving in the direction of more self-reliance. I would recommend this to anyone even considering

beekeeping.

Jean says

This book is a wonderful guide to top-bar beekeeping. There are few books that are specific to this way of beekeeping and this is an essential addition to the top-bar beekeepers library.

The authors add their own insight on best practices for natural hive management without chemical interventions. Chapters cover the beekeeping basics of bee biology and hive management, but what sets this book apart from other natural beekeeping guides are the illustrations of top-bar hive management. These useful diagrams demonstrate hive management techniques specific to top-bar hives for each season of the year as well as solutions for specific conditions a beekeeper may encounter - combining hives, making a divide, etc.

Another fascinating addition is the section on raising queens. Since the emphasis in this book is on building disease resistant bees that are successful locally, the information on raising queens in a top-bar hive is valuable and helpful to beekeepers who are also interested in strengthening the genetic diversity of bees in their area.

I was concerned that the book would be useful only to those in an arid, high-elevation environment, however the authors are specific about their experience with local plants and climate conditions. They often mention when the information they are imparting is specific to their environment.

Fernleaf says

A fantastic intro to top-bar beekeeping, and refreshingly different from most beekeeping books that I've looked at. The main focus of this book is the proper management of a top-bar hive for healthy bees, with honey and wax being excellent benefits but not the main focus of the venture. The authors speak with long-term experience, over 30 years, and have dealt personally (and without chemicals) with many of the 'scourges' of beekeeping like foulbrood and varroa mites. It's quite obvious that the authors care deeply about bees and their future.

Bryan says

Clearly written and informative. I do think this book scared me a little regarding the reality of being a beekeeper. I'll keep reading up on honeybees for a while more.

Meghan says

As I'm just getting in to top-bar beekeeping I was looking for an introduction to the practices and found this at the library. It has great photography and plenty of descriptions of how to build, manage, and maintain a

TBH. Some things were quite a bit more advanced (i.e., raising multiple queens through grafting), but it was good to read an overview. I feel more confident as I go on as a beginning beekeeper after reading this book.

ETA: Reread this again recently - got much more out of it this time around. The charts of bars were particularly helpful. I also borrowed the DVD from the library but haven't watched it yet.

amelia says

This is a really nice overview of top-bar beekeeping and organic hive management. As a brand new beekeeper, I'd have liked some more details (as in, let's just really lay it out step by step and leave no bit/advice unmentioned), but I suspect that wasn't the author's intent. I should probably follow his advice and find a local beekeeper to observe, but being an introvert who prefers learning from books. . . we'll see.

Hearth says

I loved this book. I learned so much about bees. The author's enthusiasm made it interesting. I did not pick up this book intending to start a hive, and now that I know how much work is involved (and how much can go wrong) I definitely don't plan on it. I felt like it gave me a feel for beekeeping and I understand bees better now. If you are planning on starting hives this book will not be enough. You will probably need to take a few courses because at times this is too abstract. It is more of an auxiliary and reference, although it does give you some idea of what you're in for if you go down this road.

Tammie Painter says

I'd give this book 5 stars for someone who already keeps bees in a top bar hive, but 3 stars for someone (like me) wanting to start a top bar hive. There appears to be great info on disease prevention and overall organic care of bees, but I found the information on starting a hive and hive management to be a bit over the head for someone who hasn't kept bees before. I was hoping this book would be a really handy guide to get me started with my top bar hive (which you can see on my website TammiePainter.com), but it wasn't. The book seemed, not to give any details on "Your First Year" - information I was looking for.

Still, I don't want to knock this book because I'm sure - once I figure out how to get the hive going - it will be a great resource for managing the hive.

UPDATE June 2013 - Now that I have bees, I read the book again and some (not all) of the information felt more relevant. Still feels a little "advanced" for me in my first year though.

Joseph Schoolland says

I enjoyed this. Great book if you're thinking about top bar beekeeping. Les's worldview is different than mine, but I appreciate the idea of breeding bees for strong genetics rather than relying on a regular use of treatments. I found this video as a great companion: https://youtu.be/0gkz34d_L5w

Katie says

Things I appreciated about this book:

- Its length. The other bee books I've gotten are like college textbooks. Which, is great, but also...long?
- Its range. While it may be short, I felt like it not only covered most of the basics, but also a lot of stuff that was way over my head at this point, and would be helpful later on. (Mostly stuff about splitting hives and raising queens.) Even though I read the entirety of it, I want to get a copy to have on hand.
- Its tone. It was very informational, but also felt sort-of personal. Like it was a casual conversation with a mentor. I never felt talked down to nor did I feel like he looked down upon people who choose to use different hive styles or bee management. He points out his reasons for what he does, and expresses concerns with some other ways of apiary management, but basically says you have to figure out a way that works for you and your bees. A++.
- PICTURES. There are so many fabulous pictures and diagrams, ranging from what everything in the hive looks like (how to distinguish what's in a cell) to diseases/parasites, to some pretty detailed diagrams about bar arrangement techniques based on the time of year and what you're trying to achieve.

I would highly recommend to anyone who is interested in top bar hives, or getting started with bees.

*Edit: apparently I was asleep while writing this so I fixed the grossly offensive its. ;P

January says

Finally! A beekeeping book that feels right. After doing tons of research and reading books on the traditional Langstroth chemical-heavy beekeeping methods, I just didn't feel good about my new hobby. I am an organic gardener and constantly applying chemicals to these wonderful creatures' habitat and using plastic foundations and high-fructose corn syrup and all these methods to control the bees just didn't seem natural or healthy to me. But as a beginner, I don't feel like I have enough knowledge to go off the beaten track and do things differently. This book not only completely validated all my feelings about the chemicals and plastic, but showed me how to keep bees in a way that support their natural instincts with zero chemical inputs. Thank you.

I intended on skimming this book as I normally do with non-fiction, but I actually read this cover to cover, it was that engaging. The author speaks with decades of experience in both the traditional Langstroth non-organic method and his own top-bar organic method. So, having seen it up close, he was able to explain why the conventional way is so unsustainable. I can no longer look at the black combs pictured in conventional beekeeping books without gagging.

As others have said, it is slightly lacking on the "what to do in the first year" department, and I wish there were more photographs, but I can get these from any of the other conventional beekeeping books. The organic methods of pest control (mesquite smoke for varroa mites!) and top bar hive management techniques in this book are hard to find and invaluable. This has a permanent space on my home bookshelf and I have already referred to it multiple times as I prepare for my first nuc delivery.

Kayla Marie says

The best book I've read on the subject. In my area top bar keeping isn't popular, so I'm dependent on books & the Internet for help. That being said, I honestly wish more information about overwintering bees was included... it seems as if the majority of his experience is in NM, but I'm in WI with harsh winters/windchill. All the beekeepers I've spoken to in the area point to the weather as the reason to NOT use this type of hive... I'm neglecting their wisdom and conducting some expensive experiments.
