

Beekeeping Basics: How to Establish a New Apiary

Thoughtful setup and preparation for your hives now can save you (and your bees) loads of time and trouble later.

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PHOTO: Susan Brackney



by **Susan Brackney**
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I'm a planner, plain and simple. So, when I set up new hives, I prefer to mitigate problems before my first bee package arrives. Sure, I have the usual questions. Like which direction should the hive face? Considering that the morning sun helps get

the hive humming early, east or southeast are good options. But that's just one aspect of apiary placement and design. There are many others.

The Basics

First, how well do you know the precise locations of your own property lines? What about city or county ordinances and any applicable neighborhood covenants? For my part, I searched local Geographic Information Systems records online, found my land parcel number and saw my property boundaries. Livestock and animal control ordinances were also available for me to check online.

These Geographic Information Systems, or GIS, records (including parcel information) might also be available in your area. [Here's one place to check.](#) You should also be able to call your county recorder or local librarian to check on your property lines and relevant beekeeping laws.

When it comes to positioning your beehives, choose an out-of-the-way spot that's not too close to the property line. It should also remain relatively dry during wet weather and provide some sort of windbreak—such as trees or shrubbery—near the north side of your hives.

The Neighbors

They say fences make good neighbors, and I think they're great for apiaries, too. I erect wire fencing around my hives—complete with "No Trespassing" signs. I allow for 5 to 6 feet of space between the front of the hive and the front of the fence, because that's roughly the distance bees require to reach a flying altitude of 5 feet. The result? If any curious neighbors *do* happen to wander in front of the apiary, my flying bees will probably already be well over their heads.

I also allow about 5 feet between the back of the hive and the back wall of the fence. This gives me room to maneuver behind my hives during inspections. Finally, I like to leave 2 to 3 feet between the sides of the hive and the sides of my fencing. Watching the bees come and go is one of my favorite pastimes, so having room for a small chair by the side of the hive is important to me. My fence also includes a 2- to 3-foot-wide gate that can comfortably accommodate loads of beekeeping supplies and equipment.

Incidentally, to keep my neighbors happy, I ply them with fresh honey and try to inspect my hives only when most folks around me are at work. (Depending on your own neighbors' proximity, it also pays to keep any potential swarming shenanigans in check.) If your hives are visible from the road, consider adding some lattice panels or planting zinnias, sunflowers and other tall, nectar-bearers to further screen your apiary from view.

Finishing Touches



Susan Brackney

This year, I'm trying my luck with a new top bar hive that came with its own stand. If I were placing any [Langstroth](#) hives in my new apiary, I'd be sure to elevate them with a couple of cement blocks. This keeps the hive entrance out of the muck during inclement weather, but, more importantly, if a skunk or other curious mammal makes its way inside my fencing, it would need to stand on its haunches to prey on my bees. That means the animal's tummy—and other delicate bits—would be more exposed to my guard bees' stings. Not only do the bees get a better chance to defend themselves, but would-be predators also have less time to clean out my hives.

Now, because my heavy clay soil does get soggy when it rains, I took extra pains to shore up the land where my hive would sit. First, I dug a shallow depression and lined it with a layer of pea gravel. Then, I added a layer of sand and topped that with a layer of soil. To finish, I laid in and leveled some scraps of heavy fiber cement siding that I had. The legs of my top bar hive will stand on these reinforced siding pieces.

Ultimately, I won't want to weed in or around my bees' enclosure. To eliminate the need, I added a layer of cardboard beneath the fencerow, used weed barrier fabric inside the fenced area and topped it with pine needles. (If you like, you can also plant early spring-flowering crocus and snowdrop bulbs through slits in your weed barrier before you finish mulching.)



Susan Brackney is a freelance writer and author of the *Insatiable Gardener's Guide* (Five Hearts Press, 2004) and *Plan Bee: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About the Hardest-Working Creatures on the Planet* (Perigee Books, 2009).

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