

Races of Honey Bees in North America

There are several popular honey bee races that are raised in North America for honey. Some of these races are considered gentler than others making them more ideal for beginning beekeepers. One other deciding point for some when making their choice of bees to keep, is if they have a tendency to swarm. Keep in mind all bees will swarm if they are crowded; however there are some races that have a higher tendency to swarm. Also, some races are more common and are easier to purchase and less expensive than others. No matter which race you decide on, keep in mind a well managed colony should do just fine.

Italian Bees

Originally from Italy, Italian bees have become the most popular bee in the United States as they have been considered the best all-purpose bee and have relatively gentle behavior. They are the most widely distributed of all honey bees due to their ability to adapt to most climates. These bees are yellow in color, overwinter well and build up quickly in spring. Most Italian bees are bred and raised in the south; however, you can find some northern breeders as well but they typically won't be available for purchase until late spring or early summer. Italian bees are most often recommended to beginners due to the fact that they are the most common bee stock and easily found in packages. Their biggest weakness is that they are prone to rob and drift. More food is consumed in cooler climates that have hard winters because they do not form a tight winter cluster, they have

to consume more food to compensate for the heat loss. They also have a tendency to raise brood late in autumn which also increases the winter food consumption. Characteristics are:

- Relatively gentle and non-aggressive
- Worker bees are a light color and the queen is darker in color making it easier to locate
- Great foragers
- Colonies are usually large
- Winter well
- Minimum propolis
- Keep a clean hive
- Yellow in coloring with bands on the abdomen
- Moderate tendency to swarm
- Readily builds comb
- Have a strong tendency to rob
- Most common race of honeybees
- Good beginner bee



Italian honeybees are yellow in color.

Caucasian Bees

Caucasian honeybees originated from the high valleys of the Central Caucasus. They are a silver gray to dark brown in color. Caucasian bees are slower to build up in the spring, they are more gentle than the Italian and not prone to rob and are on average just as productive as the Italians. They produce an excessive amount

of propolis which may be beneficial if you collect it, otherwise it can make it more difficult to work in the hive because they produce a very sticky propolis. Characteristics are:

- Moderate tendency to swarm
- Large and strong population
- Relatively gentle and non-aggressive
- Winter well by stopping brood production in the fall
- Forages earlier and on cooler days
- Produce and use a good deal of propolis
- Silver gray to brown in color
- Has a longer tongue than most races and can thereby take advantage of more nectar sources than most
- Slow spring startup
- Are not prone to rob



Caucasian honeybees are silver gray to dark brown in color.

Carniolan Bees

Carniolan honeybees are a subspecies of Western honeybee. It originates from Slovenia the southern part of Austrian Alps. They can be found also in parts of Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Serbia. They are a darker brown to black in color. They are the second most

popular race among beekeepers after the Italian. Their ability to defend themselves against insect pests makes them a great choice. Carnolians are extremely gentle in their behavior toward beekeepers. They have a higher resistance to some diseases and parasites. Carnolian performance benefits greatly from supplemental feeding of pollen substitute and sugar syrup. Characteristics are:

- Extremely gentle and non-aggressive - easy to work with
- Best wintering bee as the queen stops brood production in the fall
- Little use of propolis
- Builds up very rapidly in spring
- Summer brood rearing depends on pollen and nectar flow
- Forages on colder and wetter days than most other races
- Brood production is dependent on availability of nectar and pollen sources, meaning more food equals more foragers, less food equals smaller population
- Less susceptible to brood disease
- Tends to swarm easily when no expansion room is available
- If pollen is scarce, brood rearing greatly diminishes
- Not likely to rob



Carniolan honeybees are a darker brown to black in color.

Russian

The Russian honeybee came from the Primorsky region and have evolved traits of resistance to natural mites since it lived in a region that is home to Varroa Mite and Tracheal Mites. They are a dark brown to black in color and resemble the Carniolan bee. The bees winter well in extremely cold temperatures in small winter clusters. They tend to be more apt to build queen cells throughout the brood season and have a tendency to swarm. Characteristics are:

- Resistant to Varroa Mite
- Resistant to Tracheal Mite
- Winter well
- Brood rearing is highly dependent on forage availability
- Tends to swarm
- Expensive



Russian honeybees are a darker brown to black in color.

Buckfast

Buckfast honey bees were developed by Brother Adams in the 20th century and are a mixed race of bees. They have become very popular among beekeepers due to their extremely gentle behavior, their ability to build up rapidly in the spring and produce great crops. They drop back in population come fall and winter extremely well. Characteristics are:

- Build up rapidly in the spring
- Extremely gentle

- Winter well
- Adapted well to areas with damp cold winters
- Low tendency to swarm
- Low consumption of winter stores
- Inclined to rob
- Excellent honey producers
- Resistant to tracheal mites



Buckfast honeybees are yellow to brown in color.

QUICK TIPS

- **Italian Bees** are the most popular bee in the United States because of their gentle behavior.
- **Caucasian Bees** are slower to build up in spring, but are more gentle than the Italian Bee.
- **Carniolan Bees** are the second most popular race because of their ability to defend themselves against insect pests.
- **Russian Bees** have built up resistance to Varroa Mites and Tracheal Mites.
- **Buckfast Bees** build up rapidly in spring and are extremely gentle in behavior.