

The 10 Essential Steps to Better Beekeeping

BEEKEEPING SECRET #1: GETTING READY FOR YOUR NEW HOBBY

Beekeeping is truly a hobby for *everyone* because bees are not dependent on foraging material that is found nearby. If you are worrying that your bees might starve because there are few flower patches in your immediate vicinity, *don't*.

Bees are excellent at flying and foraging insects and it is fairly common for a healthy honeybee to travel for miles in search of suitable source of pollen and nectar. The honeybee is capable of locating suitable foraging material whether it's spring, summer, fall or winter (yes, honeybees can still fly out during winter!).

The biggest challenge when it comes to “backyard beekeeping” is convincing your neighbors that they are safe even if you have a wooden hive nearby. The first thing that you should do *before* buying honeybees and a Langstroth hive is installing a tall enough fence in your new “bee yard”.

The new fence has to be at least 6 feet in height. Apart from reducing the visibility of your yard, tall fences also force honeybees to fly at a certain height. You wouldn't want them flying below the height of an average person - people might think the bees are after them!

Bees also need plenty of water to drink. The main reason why honeybees visit places like kiddie pools is that they do not have any clean water to drink nearby. In the absence of an adequate water source, they try to manage their situation by drinking from sources *outside* your yard.

This might cause problems with your neighbors. To remedy this you may want to place a pebble-filled pail near your hive. Fill the small pail with just enough water to slightly submerge the pebbles. The pebbles will serve as footholds for the honeybees when they are drinking.

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BEEKEEPING SECRET #2: THOU SHALL NOT INTRUDE

Let's face it - unless your neighbors are fine with your idea of raising bees nearby, you won't get any peace as a beekeeper. So instead of risking your good relations with your neighbors, follow our four sure-fire ways to establish rapport with your neighbors in light of your newfound hobby:

Tip #1: Do not buy more than one hive for your own yard. The presence of three or more hives in just one area can draw fire from neighbors who do not understand that bees, unless disturbed, are really very gentle insects.

If you want to take care of more than one colony of honeybees, we suggest that you find a suitable *farm* nearby and ask the owner if you can place a hive or two on his property.

Nine times out of ten, the farm owner will agree to your idea because farmers know just how important pollination is to crop production. Your honeybees will be more than welcome to stay in farms.

Tip # 2: Bees don't circle around their hive when they leave during foraging flights. If the entrance of the Langstroth hive is facing west, they will begin their journey by going west. This being the case, *don't* point the Langstroth hive where people are most likely to pass. Point it somewhere where people rarely walk by to reduce chance meetings with startled passerbys.

Tip # 3: Don't flaunt your hive - because not everyone understands that apiculture is safe, as long as the beekeeper knows what he is doing. Painting your hive a light color like white or light gray can help make it less attention-grabbing.

Tip # 4: Once you are completely confident of your own skills in safely inspecting your hive/s, you can begin inviting the neighborhood kids (and adults) to see your bees. Don't forget - your visitors need to wear the proper bee-tight clothing, too!

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BEEKEEPING SECRET #3: STOPPING BY FOR A CUP OF TEA...AND HONEY

Regular visits to the bee yard is necessary to ensure that your colony is doing well in its new home. Surprisingly, honeybees are one of the most harassed livestock in the world.

The common enemies of the honeybee colony include: wasps, bees from other hives (honey robbers!), small mammals (skunks & mice), large animals (pets and even *bears*) and other insects (beetles & moths).

This being the case, you *need* to make sure that your hive is doing fine in its new location. But visiting your bees for the first time might be tricky, because bees are quick to respond to disturbances. Generally, it is considered a good time to visit when:

- Nearly all of the older bees are out foraging. Foraging usually commences during the early hours of the morning.
- When the nectar flow is strong (blooming flower beds are a good sign that there is a strong nectar flow that drives bees to a foraging frenzy).
- When the hive is not too hot, nor too cold. To make sure that your hive has efficient thermal regulation, use an elevated hive stand to improve the circulation inside the hive structure.
- When the temperature of the environment is no higher than 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Any hotter and the bees might be a bit more excitable and easily agitated because of the heat.

Quick tip: if mice are bothering your hive, remove wire screen reducers from the entrance and exit points of the hive and use mouse guards instead.

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BEEKEEPING SECRET #4: DON'T FEAR THE FEAR

Bee stings are a fact of life for beekeepers - so this is one possibility in beekeeping that you have to contend with the moment that you step into a bee yard with an active honeybee colony. It is possible to get through the entire year without getting stung by honeybees, and there are several ways to accomplish this:

1. First, never forget to wear the appropriate bee-tight clothing. A good combination for the bee yard would be: netted veil, long denim pants, long-sleeved 'beekeeper's blouse', a pair of tall working boots and a pair of gloves. You can substitute latex gloves if you think thick working gloves impede your hands' dexterity.
2. When you are in the presence of the colony, always move *slowly* and *gently*. No sudden or harsh movements - your honeybees will appreciate it if you don't cause any major disturbance in the hive. Too much disturbance can actually cause your colony to abscond or abandon their hive completely.
3. *Don't crush your honeybees!* It might be frustrating at first, trying to extract the wooden frames for inspection with all the honeybees crawling about. However, crushing or swatting them is *not* the way to go. Instead, use a soft-bristled bee brush to carefully move them from one side to another as you go about your work.
4. Always remember to hold the woodwork firmly in your hands. Dropping a frame full of worker bees (or the queen) can cause a ruckus so bad that you would have a very interesting story to tell later on.
5. Feeding frenzies and robbing behavior can be prevented if you keep the bee yard free of open container filled with sweet foodstuff, like honey or sugar syrup. If you have to bring supplemental feeding to the beeyard, keep your sugar syrup tightly sealed and *away* from the hives/s.

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BEEKEEPING SECRET #5: GETTING THE BEST FOR YOUR BUCK

The most convenient way to source your new colony of honeybees is by ordering a pack of bees from an established breeder. However, *not all breeders* have the customers' best interest at heart. You need to guard your investment from breeders who seem to be putting in the *least* effort in maintaining their apiary. Here are some recommendations for finding a good bee breeder in your area:

- First off, try to contact any beekeeping club or beekeeping organization in your state, city or town. Beekeeping organizations are a great place to get solid references for good breeders, because such organizations usually promote organic/holistic beekeeping, etc. and they are more than willing to pass along a good reference to anyone who wishes to explore apiculture or beekeeping.
- Between a breeder with 15 years of experience in breeding bees and a younger breeder with 1 1/2 years of experience, go with the more experienced breeder. Mastery of beekeeping requires a lot of time, and seasoned breeders are more likely to have more experience in preventing diseases and preserving strong genetic lines.
- Before buying a package of bees from a breeder, ask if the apiary board is aware that the breeder is operating. Next, ask the breeder if regular inspections are carried out (at least on a yearly basis). If such inspections are carried out, year by year, then the bees in the apiary are in good hands.
- Next, ask the breeder if the bees are going to be replaced if there is significant mortality during shipping. If the breeder refuses to give a guarantee, don't buy from him.

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BEEKEEPING SECRET #6: IN THE EYE OF THE “BEE”HOLDER

Regular inspection of your hives is needed to keep your colony/colonies disease-free and pest-free. But don't open that hive just yet! Read our safety guidelines to make sure that everything is safe and the bees would be more prepared to meet their beekeeper.

Here are our safety guidelines when performing regular inspections on active honeybee colonies:

1. Always have your smoker at hand when visiting your bee yard. Make sure that you have a lot of fuel with you, so your smoker will not go out when you most need it. Also, it would help if you placed a small stool or table near the hive so you can place your smoker there when not in use.

Do not place your smoker right next to the hive (on the ground) as you might trip over the smoker. Whenever you are opening the hive, always use a few puffs of smoke to dampen the activity.

2. Congesting is a notoriously common problem, so be sure to check for congestion. The presence of supersedure cells is a telling sign that the colony may be planning to swarm due to congestion (though congestion is not the *sole* reason for swarming). Remove the supersedure cells and create another colony if need be, to ease congestion.

3. Always position yourself at the sides of the Langstroth hive - don't block the entrance to the hive. Foraging bees are continually leaving and returning to the hive, so you would not want to disrupt the 'traffic' of the hive.

4. Never over-smoke your honeybees. It is a known fact that over-smoking causes too much lethargy in the colony. Too much smoke can make your bees less active and *less productive* for days. A few puffs of smoke is enough to make honeybees settle. Of course, this varies from species to species but *generally* a few puffs is enough.

5. When inspecting the hive, firmly hold each wooden frame with both hands and carefully extract it from the hive body. Close the hive when not extracting any frames.

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BEEKEEPING SECRET #7: MOVING DAY

Moving a beehive is actually one of the more sensitive tasks associated with beekeeping. It requires planning and lots of preparation to be carried out successfully. Here are some general guidelines to make any hive transport a success:

- Move your hive/s during the nighttime because bees are less active during this time. Nighttime also means that all of the bees are in the hive. You might lose many foraging worker bees if you move the hive in the morning or in the afternoon, during the peak of foraging activity.
- Before moving the hive, you have to make sure that none of the bees will get out during the drive to the new hive location. You have two choices when it comes to closing off the hive. Your first option is to use regular adhesive tape to close off the entrance and exit points. This is recommended *only* if the hive structure is relatively well ventilated and the weather is cool. If not, use wire screens.
- When installing a new hive in a new location, always use a *hive stand* to elevate the Langstroth hive and separate its bottom region from the moist ground. This is done to preserve the wood and also to improve the air circulation in the hive structure.
- The Langstroth hive is not a fixed structure; it can fall apart during a rough ride to its new location. Using ratchet straps is an effective way to secure the various parts of a Langstroth hive. Alternatively, you can also use special staples used in beekeeping to keep the entire hive together during the trip.
- If ratchet straps or staples are not available, crating of the hive is also an option (though this is the most difficult way to secure a hive).

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BEEKEEPING SECRET #8: 2 IS COMPANY...300 IS A CROWD

Swarming is a honeybee's way to reproduce *in the wild*. In captivity, swarming is considered a big problem because it reduces honey production and takes away more than *half* of the original population of a once active colony. When a colony of bees decides to swarm, the old queen bee leads 50% to 90% of the total population to establish a new hive elsewhere. Queen cells are created by the colony prior to the swarm.

One must be *very observant* to make sure that a colony does not swarm. But why does a colony swarm in the first place? Here are some of the most common causes:

- The colony has had a population explosion. A healthy colony can grow to 50,000 to 60,000 individual members during the summer months. Unfortunately, this is also the time when swarming becomes an all too common occurrence in bee farms and in the wild.
- The number of young workers and old workers is disparate; the ratio is unbalanced. When there is an imbalance in the population (when there are too many young workers) swarming can also take place.
- If you have a queen bee that is more than 2 years old, the risk for swarming is doubled. To avoid this problem, it is necessary to re-queen your colonies at least once every two years with a new queen bee.
- The number of honeycombs is no longer sufficient for food storage and brood rearing. In such cases, creation of a new colony or the addition of supers is necessary.

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BEEKEEPING SECRET #9: OUT FOR THE COUNT

Bees are least active during the wintertime because of the general scarcity of foraging materials and the temperature drop. Here are some things to expect during the winter:

1. Honeybees are more vulnerable to attacks from common enemies because they are the least active during winter. They are also lethargic, which means the bees will not be able to protect the hive the way they used to.
2. At 14 degrees Celsius, honeybees are often completely immobile. The winter cluster of bees is tightest when the temperature drops down to 14 degrees Celsius or even lower. Though some species of bees are hardy enough during winter, don't expect too much from your bees.
3. Placing mouse guards during the wintertime is important to keep both rodents and wax moths from invading the vulnerable hive. Wax moths can cause complete destruction of the hive - so it would be best if you kept out these insects from the hive during the winter months.
4. Emergency feedings might be necessary if the food stores of the bees are running low during the start of the winter season. Emergency feeding can be achieved by placing a bag of sugar syrup inside the hive body.
5. If the temperature of the environment is more than 14 degrees Celsius, some bees can be seen flying out of the hive. These are called "cleansing flights".

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BEEKEEPING SECRET #10: SPRING INTO ACTION

Early spring is a good time to check on your honeybees. Did your bees survive winter? Did they contract dysentery during the winter clustering? All of these concerns can be addressed during an early spring inspection.

Inspect your hive when the temperature begins to rise consistently. If you open your hive too soon, the brood may become chilled and may die. It is also common to see some dead bees during early spring inspection. This is normal - some honeybees simply cannot handle the drastic changes during wintertime.

It is also important to check whether you still have a healthy, egg-laying queen bee in the hive. If not, you may have egg-laying workers. If this is the case, the egg-laying workers must be removed from the colony as they produce male drones only. If you have a queen-less, weak colony, it might be necessary to unite the weak colony with a stronger colony. Many beekeepers recommend the newspaper method to unite a weak colony and a strong colony. Just make sure that the stronger colony is queen-right.

In addition to checking for the presence of a healthy queen, check the frames for honey and other food stores. If there is a lot of uncapped and capped honey, your bees are doing well. It is also normal for bee colonies to lose 1/3 to 1/2 of its total population during very cold winter months. The early spring nectar flow will help the colony in its efforts in repopulating the hive.

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