

TENDING YOUR BEES IN THE SPRINGTIME

By Susan Chernk McElroy

Spring is a magic time in the bee yard. After waiting through the long dark season, the light returns, and if we are blessed, our hives will have made it through this difficult time. In spring, we may have good reason to go into our hives and look for:

- Honey stores
- Brood
- Dead bees
- Queen cells

April is called “The Starving Month” in our area. If we have good weather and plenty of sunshine, our bees may assume spring has arrived and there’ll be plenty of food available from then forward. That can encourage them to build up faster. That sounds like a good thing, but if the heavier nectar flow is slow to develop, or we have ten days of rain, they may run out of food reserves and starve. In the Northwest, spring is a good time to do a hive check as soon as weather permits us to see if the bees need supplemental feeding. A simple way to know how much honey remains is to lift a corner of the hive. If it feels light, you may want to feed them.

Sometimes you’ll find a pile of bees on the hive floor that expired over the winter. They may be clogging the door or decomposing, and it is good to clean them out. If we go into the hive and find capped brood or open larvae, we know our Queens have survived the winter. In a strong hive, we might find drone cells or even queen cells, indicating swarm preparation. Spring is also time to “open up” the brood nest by adding new bars on the outside edges. If you find a small, struggling hive, you can step in and reduce the size of the interior space the bees are working to heat. If there are too few overworked bees to keep new brood warm, you can take a bar or two of brood from a strong, thriving hive and gift it to the weaker hive to strengthen it.

Entering a hive requires the skills of an enlightened surgeon. When we enter a hive, we break up the propolis seal, and sometimes move “organs” (wax combs) around. We don’t go into the hive lightly or just to satisfy our curiosity: Each time we enter the hive, it will take our bees a full day or two days to fix what we’ve altered and to restore the hive atmosphere and temperature.

1. BEFORE WE GO INTO THE HIVE, WE CONSIDER

- Climate
- Time of Day
- Barometric pressure & imminent weather changes

- Purpose
- Mood (ours and the bees)

2. WE GATHER OUR TOOLS

- First we clean our hive tools so nothing is inadvertently transmitted from a diseased hive to a healthy one
- Bring a tray with a knife, spare rags, paper towels, and a bowl for collecting removed combs.
- Wear a veil or jacket. Better safe than sorry!
- Write up our plan on what we intend to do and list the steps. If doing this with a friend, talk through every step BEFORE opening the hive. Imagine ourselves doing these tasks.

3. THEN WE PREPARE OURSELVES

- Take a personal reading. Am I relaxed or tense? A calm, clear mind results in a calm, relaxed body.
- Tie back long hair.
- Wash hands so we don't carry in offensive smells like sweat or what we had for lunch.
- Carry our tools out to the bee yard and pause about 12 feet from the hives. This is the distance your radiant being extends. Watch and listen.
- Tell the bees what you are planning to do.

4. OBSERVE THE HIVE:

- Move closer and begin to sense the mood of the hive.
- Are fanners on the landing board?
- How assertive are the guard bees?
- Walking slowly through the flight path, do any bees "ping" you?
- Standing by the side of the hive, can you place your fingers on the landing board with no aggression from the bees?
- Put fingers in the path of fanning vapors. Breathe in the bee scent, which is calming to the human nervous system. Puff very gently onto the landing board and gauge the bees' response.
- If everything passes muster, move into the next step.

OPENING THE HIVE:

- Look through the viewing window and decide which combs to remove first. Have a place on hand to hang removed combs so it's easy to know what order and which way each comb faces.
- Keep a towel and a follower board handy to close off the frames if the bees get concerned.
- Move slowly and gently.
- Rub a small bit of honey/nectar or propolis on your hands.

- Be sure to detach the brace comb before lifting a bar to inspect.
- Be three steps away from being able to close the hive at any time.
- Remain aware of sun, wind, and the sounds from the hive.

Following the guidelines here, we can't make a mistake! We can enter our hive with confidence and grace. Blessed Bee!