



Harvesting Honey from a Top Bar Hive

Introduction

Harvesting [honey](#) out of your Top Bar Hive is very simple and can be done with a minimal amount of equipment. The average hive will produce from 3 to 5 gallons per year under normal weather conditions with ample rain. The more flowers that bloom, the more nectar the bees will gather and the more honey they will produce.

In early summer, the population in each beehive begins to peak and the colony begins to produce surplus honey. The bees store this honey in order to have enough food to make it through the winter. They bring in much more than they need, which allows you to remove some each year. Typically you would harvest



honey after the summer heat has caused the spring wildflowers to stop blooming.

While opening the hive, you will need to wear your [bee veil](#). Prepare your [beekeeper's smoker](#) in advance. The bees can get a little bit excited when you begin to take their honey!

Equipment

To harvest honey from a hive you will need the following beekeeping equipment and household items.

Cutting the Combs

- Bee veil*
- Beekeeper's smoker*
- Hive tool*
- Bee brush*
- 1 bowl large enough to contain the combs
- 1 cloth sized to cover the cut combs
- Serrated knife to cut the honeycomb

Extracting Honey

- Kitchen potato masher
- Clean bucket
- Bucket spigot* (*optional*)
- Cheesecloth – large enough to stretch double over the top of the bucket
- Copper wire long enough to reach around the top of the bucket
- Pliers
- Storage jars with lids

* See *Beekeeping Suppliers Supplement*

Instruction

Open the Hive

- Apply [smoke](#) to the front entrance and top of the hive as you slide off the hive cover.
- Using your [hive tool](#), tap on the top of the wooden bars from front to back to find the [honeycombs](#) ready for harvest. A full comb will sound solid; an empty comb will sound hollow.
- Pry loose the first hollow-sounding bar and remove it. Apply a few puffs of smoke to the open entrance and set the bar aside.
- Continue to inspect each bar. Watch for combs with large areas of [capped cells](#). Place those with small combs and uncapped [cells](#) back into the hive. The comb is ready for [harvest](#) if the bees have capped at least 3/4 of the cells. Honey harvested before the cells are capped tends to ferment.

Harvesting the Honey

- Once you find a comb ready to harvest, use a [bee brush](#) to brush the bees off the honeycomb and back into the hive. The bees will get excited as you brush them, so give them a little smoke.
- The bees will rebuild the comb on each bar, so leave a generous inch of the comb attached. Slice the comb right into the bowl. Then place the bar back into the top of the hive.



- Cover the cut comb with a cloth to prevent the bees from taking the honey back to the hive.
- Continue checking the full combs, cutting off those that are ready. If the bees become too active, use more smoke.

Note: Be sure that you do not take honey from combs that contain the [brood nest](#). Place them back into the hive. Typically bees place 10 to 15 combs of baby bees in the front of the hive. Behind those, they store pure honey.

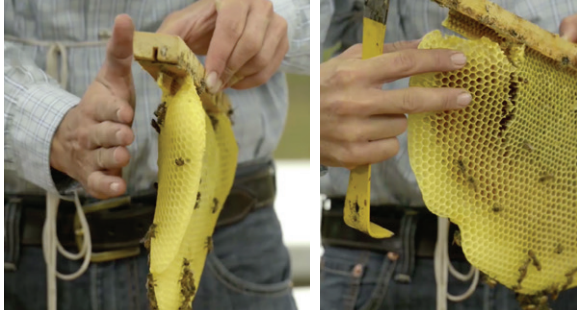
Remember that honey is the bees' winter food and although they bring in more than they need, you shouldn't harvest too much. On an average year, you will need to leave about 3 full combs in the hive.

Honeycomb Management

Throughout the year you will need to manage the hive to provide the bees with what they need to store their honey. When flowers are plentiful, they will need additional space. Increase the size of the [colony](#) by moving the [divider board](#) further to the back of the hive. In the wintertime, you may need to decrease the space by moving the board forward.

One of the things you need to watch for while checking your hive is the formation of [crooked honeycombs](#). When the bees start bringing in large amounts of honey, they get excited and sometimes draw out the comb thicker on





one side. They then build the adjacent comb crooked. It is important to straighten out crooked combs.

- Using your hive tool, separate the edge of the comb from the edge of the top bar. Then simply bend the comb with your hand until it becomes straight. The bees will repair any cracks and cell damage you cause.

Bees always build their combs 1 3/8" apart from center to center. By correcting the crooked comb, you will make the space between the combs a little too tight. The bees will then correct the bulge by eating away the **beeswax**, thereby making the thick part of the comb thin again.

Extracting the Honey

You can **extract** honey from the comb either indoors or out, but you'll definitely want to work away from the hive. The bees work very hard all year to store this honey in the hive, and they won't give it up very easily.

- Stretch a double layer of cheesecloth over the top of a clean bucket. Secure it with wire. Honeycomb is heavy. If the cheesecloth is not secured tightly, it can slip under the weight of the mashed comb and fall into the bucket.
- To liberate the honey out of the honeycomb cells, mash the comb in the bowl with a potato masher until the comb has crumbled.
- Slowly pour the mashed comb into the bucket. The cheesecloth will act as a strainer, keeping



the comb and wax on the top and allowing the honey to drain into the bottom.

- Let the mixture sit for about half an hour to allow ample time for all of the honey to drain. Once it has drained, the honey is ready to bottle and eat. If your bucket has a spigot, you can pour the honey directly into jars.

Storing Honey

Store honey indoors at room temperature. It will last indefinitely – unless you eat it!

- Pure honey naturally **crystallizes**. To re-liquify it, loosen the lid and set the container in hot water for a few minutes.

Set the beeswax left in the top of the cheesecloth into a bowl and set it near the beehive. The bees will retrieve any leftover honey.

After about a day, the remaining wax will look like sawdust and will contain a small amount of other hive properties. Set it aside in a dry place until you render it to use in beeswax products.

Around the family farm, uses can be found for beeswax almost anywhere. Use it for making beeswax candles, lip balms, ointments, natural homemade soap and more. Learn how to render the wax in our candle making video, which also teaches you how to make candles and use beeswax as an additive in soaps and other beeswax products.

Questions about Beekeeping?

Submit any questions for Jacob in the Q&A section on the course homepage or post it to our blog at www.sustainlife.org/blog/category/beekeeping/

Additional Videos

Other Videos in this Series

- [Introduction to Beekeeping](#)
- [Tools of the Trade](#)
- [Setting up a Hive](#)
- [The Hive – Langstroth vs. Top Bar](#)
- [The Bee Caste – Ranks & Tasks](#)

Beekeeping Suppliers

Beekeeping Tools and Supplies

Texas Hives

This company is owned and operated by Jacob and his family. You can buy his Top Bar Hive as well as other tools and supplies you'll need for beekeeping from Texas Hives.

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Recommended Bee Books & Journals

ABC and XYZ of Bee Culture

by Amos Ives Root

First Lessons in Beekeeping

by C.P. Dadant

Starting Right with Bees

by Henry G. Rowe

A.I. Root Co.

623 W. Liberty Street, Medina, OH 44256

The Bee Keeper's Handbook

by Diana Sammataro & Alphonse Avitabile

The Hive and the Honey Bee

by Joe M. Graham

American Bee Journal

51 S. 2nd Street, Hamilton, IL 62341

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Bee Culture

The Magazine of American Bee Keeping

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