

Hive Inspection Protocol

What To Do

Always attempt to judge the temper of the bees before approaching them. If they appear to be aggressive or hostile, be sure to have on protective gear. If they appear to be foraging actively they probably will be manageable. Always approach from the side or rear of the hives so as not to obstruct the flight path.

Opening The Hive

Make certain the smoker is lit and functioning well. Smoke should be used at all times during the inspection, so the bees stay under the beekeeper's control. Avoid thumping or banging the hive in any way, as this alerts the colony to an intrusion. If there is an outer cover, gently remove it and place upside down, either on the ground or a stand if you have one. The inner cover should be gently pried off and placed inside the outer cover, upside down as well. Check the inner cover for the queen, she is sometimes on it.

Removing Frames

With nine frames in a ten frame hive, the frames are much easier to remove. The frames can be pried over a bit from one side, the frame closest to the wall pulled back and removed. Check the queen is not on it. This frame can be leaned against the hive near the entrance, or placed in a nuc box for safe keeping. Subsequent frames can be pulled toward the space where the first frame came from. No other frames need to be placed outside during a routine inspection.

Inspect the Brood

If the top box contains no brood, the frames are put back in place and the whole box is placed on the upside down cover. This way if any honey drips from it, it lands on the cover, not the ground or anywhere else. The supers should be covered up if possible while the inspection is going on. Once you get to the brood nest, carefully inspect at least three representative frames (should be nearly full of brood). Usually three is sufficient to get a sense of the condition of the brood nest.

What to Look For

The baseline is the healthy colony. This will have large patches of brood nearly filling the frame. The brood will be slightly puffy looking and consistent, with not too many skips. Skipped cells can be a sign of many different things, including a spotty laying queen, a colony which is actively removing sickened brood, etc. Look for dead or dying larvae and pupae, being sure to note any discoloration. Look for sunken cappings or cappings with perforations. Any cells like this should be opened with a toothpick to check for foul brood. You should have your back to the sun and the top bar of the frame toward your chest. If foul brood is found, begin containment procedures. Testing for this and other maladies will be discussed further, but this is essential. Any hive that is opened up should always be examined for the presence of brood disease.

Sanitation

It always makes good sense to use sanitation practices, such as washing hands and hive tools between apiaries, avoid using used hive equipment of unknown or suspicious history, not feeding honey from unknown sources. Debris from the hive, such as burr comb, should be kept contained and disposed of, to prevent bees from contacting it.

Closing Up

Put the hive back together the way you found it. Keep good records of what you saw and what you did, for future reference.