

## **Tom Chester's Beekeeping Tips**

Reprinted from the SFBA newsletter

### **Tip 1** Take a beekeeping class

Beekeeping is a subtle and complex craft, and becoming good at it takes patience, experience, and information. We can get information from many sources: bee magazines, club meetings, books, working with other beekeepers. One of the most effective sources of useful information is a beekeeping class. Spring is when most of the classes are taught, and many bee clubs in the Bay Area offer classes. San Francisco and San Mateo have already had their classes but the Sacramento Area Beekeepers Association is holding two beginning classes and an intermediate class over the next two months.

The beginners classes will be taught by Randy Oliver. One will be Sunday, April 6, and the other Saturday, May 10. The intermediate class will be taught by Eric Mussen and will be held Saturday, May 24. The classes are \$25 each, a great bargain. For more information or to register, call the Sacramento Beekeepers Supply at (916) 451-2337. Even if you've kept bees for a couple of years, the beginners class by Randy Oliver will be useful and will make you a better, more confident beekeeper.

### **Tip 2** Set up a record-keeping system for your hives.

An important aspect of beekeeping is keeping track of how each hive varies over the year and from year to year. For example, sometimes a queen's rate of egg laying will suddenly drop off, and the number of frames of brood will drop. Without a record of the history of the hive, it might be hard to note changes like this until it is too late for remedial action. Similarly, hive conditions vary from year to year depending on such factors as rainfall, nectar flows, and type of bee. All of these variables make it difficult to recall past years' conditions or how a hive in the past reacted to changes in key factors.

There are many ways to set up a record-keeping system. One idea is to make notes in pencil on the top cover of each hive as to its condition, what you did on each visit, and any recommendations for future action. Or, you can number your hives and keep a notebook. Some beekeepers use a brick on top of each hive, with its position indicating hive status. I recently came across a record-keeping form that looks quite useful. You can find it at this URL:

<http://www.pugetsoundbees.org/hiveinsp.pdf>

You might want to print it out and give it a try. At least it would provide a general outline of what to look for as you open a hive.

### **Tip 3** Store your honey supers properly

Honey supers must be carefully stored when they are not on hives to prevent damage by wax moths and other critters. Here are some tips.

- The literature on beekeeping commonly recommends storing extracting supers by stacking them tightly and placing paradichlorobenzene crystals on cardboard or newspapers on the top super before sealing the stack with a hive top. Bee supply catalogs sell paradichlorobenzene under the trade name Para-Moth. Paradichlorobenzene is also sold in drugstores as a preventative for clothing moths, and it usually costs less than the stuff sold in bee catalogs. One brand is “Moth Ice Crystals.” Just make sure the package says that the active ingredient is paradichlorobenzene and not something else like naphthalene.
- Some beekeepers believe that if extracting supers, particularly those that have never had brood reared in the combs, are stored so that air and light circulates through the frames, it is not necessary to treat them with paradichlorobenzene. You might try that, but check regularly for signs of wax moths.
- If treatment fails and you get wax moths, you can use the larvae for fish bait. Or, for something a little different, fry them and eat them. According to *The Beekeeper’s Handbook*, “Wax moths are great as snack items. Fried in hot oil, they pop like popcorn and, if lightly salted, are reported to have as good or better flavor than potato chips or corn puffs.” (Third edition, p. 168)
- Be sure to tightly seal the stack of supers, particularly if they are stored outside, to prevent mice from entering. Mice like supers and dead-out hives as nest sites. If they make a nest in a stack of supers or a dead hive, they will destroy the comb.
- Don’t worry if your supers get mold on them during their winter storage. The bees will clean it off when you put the supers back on the hive in the spring.

### **Tip 4** Early spring

Early spring is a good time to check your hives to make sure there is sufficient room for the queen as she increases her egg laying. Often the bees are clustered in the top brood chamber and you can make room by switching the top and bottom boxes (if you are using two brood chambers).

Sometimes the bees will plug up the frames in the brood chamber with honey or pollen, leaving the queen little room to lay. If this is the case, the bees will tend to swarm unless you provide more room, either by inserting empty comb or by extracting the honey from the existing comb and replacing in the hive.

### **Tip 5** Catalogs

Catalogs from the beekeeping supply companies are available. Many of you are probably on the mailing list for one of more of these companies. If you're not, though, you should consider ordering one or two to see what equipment is available. That's a good way to learn. Here is a list of some supply companies with good catalogs

Dadant & Sons, Inc.	(800) 637-7468
Glorybee Foods, Inc.	(800) 456-4923
Western Bee Supplies, Inc.	(800) 548-8440
Walter T. Kelley Co., Inc.	(502) 242-2012
Mann Lake Ltd.	(800) 233-6663
Brushy Mountain Bee Farm	(800) 233-7929
Better Bee, Inc.	(800) 632-3379
Maxant Industries, Inc.	(978) 772-0576

Don't forget that Dadant has two branch offices in California if you wish to order or pick up directly. The branches are in Fresno and Chico. The toll-free number for the Fresno branch is (877) 432-3268 and for the Chico branch is (877) 332-3268.

Also, Sacramento Beekeepers Supply is a source of equipment. The company is a retail store and doesn't do mail orders. It is located at 2110 X Street in Sacramento. Telephone is (916) 451-2337.

### **Tip 6** Gloves and Sticky Hands

Many beekeepers work bare handed. It is easier to work hives without gloves, although doing so requires some practice. One problem with working barehanded, though, is that your hands become dirty and sticky. Here's a hint to make clean up easier. Get two small spray bottles. You can either buy them or recycle some window cleaner bottles, the kind with the pump sprayer. Put water in one and rubbing alcohol in the other. The water will remove honey and dirt, while the alcohol will take care of propolis.

### **Tip 7** Patience

For most of us hobby beekeepers learning our craft is a slow process. We don't have many hives, nor many years of experience. For that reason, we just don't have an opportunity to see the many variables of weather, biology, and behavior that influence a hive. One way to partially overcome that obstacle is to keep notes about what we see and do in each of our hives. When you visit a hive, make notes about what you see. At first, you may not know what's important, but with time, you'll begin to develop a eye for the relevant details.

The most important information is the egg-laying pattern of the queen, the amount of brood, and whether there is any sign of disease. Other important information includes changes since your last visit, bee temperament, signs of nectar flow, and condition of the equipment. The notes can be supplemented with information about weather, plants in bloom, and other external conditions that might affect your colonies.

Over time, you'll begin to note variations between colonies and seasons, and eventually to be able to understand how you can influence many of the factors you note.