

Extracting Honey

So you've got those lovely full, capped frames in your supers - what now? Nigel takes us through how he extracts the precious harvest.

Preparation

Make sure your work area is clean and all the equipment you need is ready to go. I extract in my kitchen and usually have the following kit ready:

- Uncapping knife: I use a bread knife. (Other methods are uncapping fork, hot air gun or uncapping roller)
- Thermos of hot water: to keep the knife in between uncapping frames - makes uncapping easier
- Latex gloves: keeps the propolis on the frames off my fingers
- Uncapping tray: you can buy ridiculously expensive contraptions for this - I use a £1.50 white plastic tray from IKEA
- Rubber mat: to stop the tray moving when uncapping (idea pinched from Steve F)
- Muslin bags to drain the cappings – you'll be surprised by how much wax you get from the cappings
- Settling tank and/or honey buckets - to hold all that wonderful golden honey
- Extractor - Don't forget this! I place it on some old rubber matting I have (old carpet would work but it's easier to wipe the honey off rubber) - this stops it moving quite so much and protects the kitchen floor.

Clearing & Removing

I use clearer boards - put on in the evening and take off the supers 24 hrs later, also in the evening. I currently use porter bee escapes and they have always worked a treat for me apart from the odd bee. I then have a spare empty super. I take the super a small distance from the hive and place it next to the empty super. Next, transfer each frame across, brushing off any bees left behind before placing in the new box. I cover the box between each frame and when full so no more bees can get in. Repeat with subsequent supers and you are left with an empty super at the end.

This does take longer than just taking the supers away to the kitchen but it ensures I don't have any bees flying around the house!

Make sure you place the supers on a plastic sheet or wooden board in the extraction area and have another one to place the supers with extracted frames. They will drip before and after and this makes cleaning up easier.

If you don't have clearer boards then you could just use the spare box but first shake the bees off over the brood box (and brush to get last few off) before taking off to the spare box. This is lot more disruptive to the bees though and you're more likely to get stung – so best get a clearer board as they're not expensive!

Extraction

My favourite bit - nothing tastes better than honey during extraction and the kitchen and whole house just smells fantastic. Just resist the temptation to lick your fingers (or at least wash your hands afterwards) - remember you are preparing food!

Timing is important - don't do it while the bees are flying unless you're 100% sure that your area is bee tight or you'll end up with a few to a LOT of visitors wanting their winter stores back!

Angle the frames so the top leans over slightly and use the knife to slice the cappings from the bottom up - this means the cappings fall away from the frame and your knife. Of course they don't always and you will have to pause and wipe them off the knife sometimes. And you will not get all the cappings off a side in one go. I usually get most off then need a couple of targeted passes on the areas I missed. When you do get it all off in one go make sure to pat yourself on the back - metaphorically as you'll get a sticky back if you do it literally! Once uncapped place frames in the extractor. When the extractor is full, spin the first side slowly - building up but not to full speed, aim to get half the honey out of the side. Then turn it around and spin fast for the second side to empty it and then turn around again to fast spin the original side and empty it. This method makes it less likely for the weight of honey on the second side breaking the comb on the first spin.

Some extractors come with a filter and settling tank underneath, others simply with a honey gate at the bottom - make sure gate IS CLOSED, otherwise you'll end up with a floor full of honey! Also check level of honey so that lugs of frames do not start getting caught in the honey - empty into settling tank or buckets before this happens. Use a filter to get rid of wax, wings, legs etc - the Thorne double metal filter is very good and is usually on offer at about half price in their various sales. If using a Settling tank, keep an eye on the tank. They usually hold 30kg+ so unless you've been *very, very* lucky you should be OK until the end.

Place your wet cappings in muslin bag(s) and suspend over bowls/jugs to drain the honey off - I usually leave mine to drain for 2/3 days - you will get a lot more than you think by looking at them!

Settling & Bottling

Leave the honey to settle for a few days so bubbles clear and scum and wax (filter should have caught all the wax) come to surface. You can use cling film to clear the top or just scoop out with a spoon, your preference. I prefer to use a big spoon - you get more honey but I put this in a jar, let it settle again and then use for myself.

If you're then going to bottle it for sale make sure each jar is slightly over the weight you're going to label it as - better to give a tiny bit of free honey than face trading standards. I weigh an empty jar, zero the scales then weigh each filled jar to be sure. You could just do this once and note the level on the jar to save weighing each one but I found weighing was just as quick as looking for the level.

Tidy-Up

Cold Water - wash everything with cold water, not warm or hot. Hot water will melt any wax and then it's a real pain to get off; cold water will adequately clean the honey without melting the wax. I usually hose out the extractor in the garden in the evening so the bees don't get a sniff of the honey.

Wet Supers

I put mine back on the hives so the bees can clean them out; they do a brilliant job. You'll get lovely dry frames in a couple of days. Put them above a crown-board with a hole in; they then treat the super as being outside of the hive and take all the honey down. Don't leave them on too long if you want to store them dry over winter or they'll start filling them again.

Wet Cappings

After you've let them drain do a similar thing with the wet supers. Put them in a feeder without the comb above a crown-board or just in some foil if you do not have a feeder. The bees will lick them dry leaving you fabulous capping wax to play with! Leave on for just a few days or they will start drawing brace comb in the space.

And Finally

Sit back and enjoy that delicious honey and don't forget to make candles & creams from the cappings.

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