

*A Bee from Mount Hymettus, the queen of the hive, ascended to Olympus, to present to Jupiter some honey fresh from her combs. Jupiter, delighting with the offering of honey, promised to give whatever she should ask. She therefore besought him, saying, "Give me, I pray thee, a sting, that if any mortal shall approach to take my honey, I may kill him." Jupiter was much displeased, for he loved much the race of man; but could not refuse the request on account of his promise. He thus answered the Bee: "You shall have your request; but it will be at the peril of your own life. For if you use your sting, it shall remain in the wound you make, and then you will die from the loss of it."*

*Evil wishes, like chickens, come home to roost.*

- Three Hundred Aesop's Fables, Rev. Geo. Fyler Townsend

Non-beekeepers seem to be fascinated by bee stings. One of the first questions I am always asked when I talk to "normal people" about beekeeping is, "How many times have you been stung?" I answer, "Do you mean today?"

I believe that the first sting a person ever gets is by far the worst, because they dread it years before it actually happens! Once we've survived a few stings, or a few dozen, or a few hundred, stings just become part of the background of beekeeping and we don't notice them anymore. At least we quit keeping score.

That doesn't mean I enjoy being stung. It hurts, just like it is supposed to, but not for long. Fortunately, there are things that beekeepers can do to reduce stinging.

### Evaluate your inspection technique

Bees respond defensively to rough or clumsy handling. New beekeepers often benefit from watching an experienced mentor demonstrate calm, methodical hive manipulations. Bee club field days are an excellent opportunity to see experts at work.

### Keep gentle bees

Defensiveness is a heritable trait in honey bees. Brother Adam, the father of the Buckfast



bee strain, believed that it was very easy to selectively breed gentle bees. That has been my experience as well. There is no reason to tolerate highly defensive/aggressive bees. If your bees are too hot to handle or simply aren't any fun to be around, all that you have to do to change the temperament of the colony is replace the queen with one from a better line. Would you keep a dog that bites you?

With that in mind, do not buy bees and queens from suppliers in or near zones which have [Africanized Honey Bees](#). These bees are no fun to work, are dangerous to have around and have many other traits that make them undesirable in our area. In some parts of the country, beekeepers have no real choice but to work with them, but fortunately we aren't in that situation in NC. Our norm, and what you should expect, is sweet, gentle bees that aren't easily provoked.

### Use smoke judiciously

Smoke is a critical component of beekeeping. Smoke saves bees' lives by deterring stinging. However too much smoke can be as bad as too little. Too much smoke aggravates bees and can incite stinging. When my bees are in a good mood, a couple of puffs at the hive entrance and a couple more across the frames when the cover is removed are all that is needed.

### Learn to read your bees

Bees will let you know when they are becoming agitated. The pitch of their buzzing increases. Rather than randomly wandering among the frames, they'll line up along the top bars and stare at you. The game is lost when

they begin to ping your veil, flying directly into it like little kamikazes.

Once bees begin to get cranked up, it is difficult to calm them back down again. It is better to learn the first signs of trouble and respond before the situation gets worse. A bit more smoke may be needed. Or perhaps you've been lingering in the hive for too long and need to finish your inspection.

### Pay attention to the weather, the clock and the calendar

When the weather is warm and sunny, the bees' temperament will be the same. Overcast, dreary days will increase stinging. Bees can also sense pending storms.

Most hobbyists can be flexible with regard to when they choose to inspect hives. Check the weather report. If the weather is bad or will soon turn bad, you may wish to postpone inspections.

Avoid inspections in the late evening when the older, crankier foragers are all at home. Ideally, inspect midday when the foragers are all out doing their jobs.

Bees in April and May are happy creatures and have more important things to do than sting. You may be able to inspect them wearing shorts, a t-shirt and a veil. In August, nothing is blooming and defense of precious honey is a high priority. Stinging is more likely. This is when your full bee suit and gloves may need to come out of the closet.

### Reduce harassment

Hives that are pestered by skunks, lawn mowers, children, too-frequent inspections by beekeepers, etc. will be on edge and more prone to sting. If you are going to mow around your hives, do so after your inspection instead of before. Put your hives on raised platforms so they can better defend themselves against skunks. Place hives out of the way of human traffic and disturbances so the colonies aren't constantly on alert.



Bees lined up along the top bars, staring at you, is a warning sign that their patience is waning.

### Avoid stinky scents

Bees communicate using pheromones (scents). A key alarm pheromone contains isopental acetate (aka "banana oil" or "pear oil"), which is also found in many lotions, shampoos and cosmetics.

Don't inspect hives when you smell like... well, when you smell. I use unscented deodorant and shampoo, and don't use cologne.

### Keep hives in full sun

Hives kept in shade will be more defensive than hives kept in full sun. Move a cranky, shaded hive to the sun and you'll be amazed at the difference in temperament.

### Separate hives

Bees don't mind when their colonies are placed close together. For years I placed colonies side-by-side on raised stands that were four feet long, 2 colonies per stand. However when hives are inspected, alarm pheromone



The bees don't have a problem being this close together but the smell of alarm pheromone must be very strong in the air! No shorts and t-shirts for these beekeepers!

from the first hive wafts over to the second hive. So when the second hive is opened, it is already on edge. The second hive becomes defensive much more quickly than the first hive.

This can be fixed by placing hives several feet apart, say 8 to ten feet. Then each hive is "fresh" when opened; there isn't an additive defensive effect.

I learned this trick while researching ways to manage African Honey Bees. It is imperative to place AHB hives a good distance apart. The biology works the same for our European Honey Bees; there is no reason not to take advantage of it.

### Inspect strongest hives first

The natural inclination for most people is to inspect their easy (small) hives first. However as you work down a row of hives, alarm pheromone accumulates in the air, as mentioned above. If you work the strongest hives last, they will be the ones affected by the

most residual pheromones. Given a choice, do you want your large hives to be on edge even before you start, or your small ones? In my experience, working the strongest hives first can really reduce the number of stings I receive in a yard.

### Learn as you go

These few tips are things that I've picked up over the years. Let your bees teach you what sets them off and learn how to make use of that. For example, I once was inspecting a hive during the hot summer. A European Hornet, with its distinctive buzz, flew overhead in search of a meal. Instantly the previously docile hive jumped to attention and sent out an attack force. I'm not sure what I could have done to prevent that, but at least I learned one of their defensive buttons and am now alert to the effect of an overflying predator.

I won't belittle the natural dislike of stings by saying things like, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" or, "I've never had anyone tell me that they, personally, were killed by bee stings." But I will say that normal people see us as very brave indeed when we get stung, laugh it off and come back for more. How cool is that?

*Randall Austin is a NC Master Beekeeper who keeps a few honey bee hives in northern Orange County. He can be reached at [s.randall.austin@gmail.com](mailto:s.randall.austin@gmail.com).*

*Copyright 2015, no reproduction in whole or in part without permission of the author.*

