

Early Spring Hive Inspection Notes

The best time to work a hive is from 10 am- 3 pm when weather is calm, sunny and 60's or above. Avoid opening the hive in nasty cool weather or at night. If temp is in the 50's or less, only take brood frames out for a few seconds, then replace quickly. Be observant for anything new, but have an objective in mind...what are you looking for? Evidence of queen, resources, disease?

1. Observe entrance activity. Hopefully, you see a lot of activity with a bee landing or taking off every second or so. Bees transporting pollen indicate they are raising brood. Keep entrance on the small side. For a new hive- 1.5 inches. If there is a traffic jam, open it up a couple inches.
2. Give two or three puffs of smoke into entrance to affect the guard bees. Then two or three puffs into notch at back of inner cover. Remove outer cover holding it up between you and hive. Same with inner cover. Don't over smoke them.
3. Are the bees looking at you? Not a good sign. Apply a bit more smoke and wait a few moments. If they are going about their business...good.
4. Use hive tool to loosen second frame from side to side, but not up. Stand so your shadow does not fall across hive. Move slowly and deliberately. Now use tool to pry up second frame using loosened first frame as a fulcrum. Lift frame slowly and vertically out of hive taking care not to roll the bees or damage comb. A frame lifter is useful for this.
5. The outer frames on each side are likely to contain honey or be partially developed. Third frame in you might find the pollen barrier, where large amounts of pollen are stored right near the brood but no brood.
6. Now examining the brood frames, we are looking for capped and uncapped brood, which shows evidence of a queen within the last ten days or less. Brood cells should be tightly packed, not spotty, with honey and sometimes pollen in the corners. Does brood look healthy or are some cells sunken with dead larvae? Count how many brood frames are in the upper deep.
7. Use capping scratcher to pry out a sample of drone brood. Are mites visible on the drone larvae?
8. Work your way across upper deep making mental notes of what you see. Replace frames in same order. Pry loose the upper deep and set it kitty corner on top of the upturned outer cover to injure the fewest bees. Now you are looking at the lower deep, which is often less populated. Repeat same process in examining the lower deep hive body making mental notes of how much brood, honey etc. you see.
9. Lift that lower super off the bottom board and examine bottom board. If there is a lot of debris from the winter on it, scrape it off with hive tool and replace it back on bottom board. You've just saved the bees a lot of effort that they will now be able to spend making comb and honey!

10. Smoke bees a bit to send them back down into the super so they don't get crushed and then replace upper hive body. Same process for subsequent boxes that go on top. Replace covers with brick on top. Make your written notes. These notes will come in handy as you look back over what the hive was doing a month ago. Total time 15 minutes. Did you wear gloves? Try to omit them next time.
11. As you leave the hive, look back. Is brick on top? Where's that hive tool? Is outer cover squarely down in position? Leave mouse guard in place, since they will no doubt still be clustering at night and you don't want visitors.
12. You have just done an early spring inspection. You will look for different things as the season goes on. For example, mite count. Honey and pollen stores. Health of queen. Do you need to add a super? For now, you are good to go!

From Andrew Hatt, 2020