

HOW TO HARVEST QUALITY HONEY



Honey is a natural sweet substance produced by honey bees from nectar or secretions of living parts of plants or excretions. The quality of honey depends on its cleanliness, taste, smell, colour and moisture content (16-19.4%). Excellent quality honey attracts high market value. Therefore, a beekeeper should be able to identify, harvest, grade and handle excellent quality honey for better income.

How to know honey is ready for harvest.

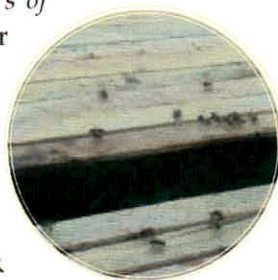
- **Timing**

Harvesting should be done after the rainy season ends and the dry season starts. In Uganda, ideal time is between October - November, January - March, and June - July. *(Do not harvest honey during rainy weather as the honey draws moisture from the air and gets too watery).*

- If the activity at the hive entrance dies down and the weight gain of your hive stops.
- Honey is ready for harvest when the hive becomes heavy and the smell of processed honey increases within apiary.
- Honey bees may form a cluster just outside the hive entrance and become more aggressive and noisy than usual as they protect their stores.
- The presence and numbers of Safari ants on the hive increases
- At the hive entrance there is no sign of pollen remains but sticky substance honey, Safari ants struggling to feed on it.
- During regular inspection look for ripe sealed honey with an even layer of sealing on the honeycomb.

Steps to follow when harvesting honey

- The ideal harvesting time is in the evening, just before dark. Don't harvest during the day time unless the apiary is located far away from public places to avoid bee sting.
- prepare the honey harvesting requirements
 - The Equipment. Use a harvesting gear (Bee suit with a veil, a pair of gumboots, bee gloves, hive knives, hive tool, bee brush, two clean dry airtight containers, bee smoker and smoking material, a hand torch and frame super) as usually the bees get upset!
 - Two people are better than one and 2 smokers are better than one. Don't harvest alone.
- Put on the harvesting gear
- *Smoke the bees, open and pry top bars of the hive from behind, and check for combs that are at least 2/3 capped or sealed full of honey. Honeycombs are usually at the back of the hive opposite the entrance.*
- Lift the comb, blow smoke on both sides and quickly brush the bees back into the hive with a feather or bee brush.



Comb arrangement inside the hive.



Newly made capped honeycombs

- *Hold the honeycombs in a vertical position to avoid breaking.*
- Using a clean knife cut away the light-colored combs leaving about 1cms of comb as a foundation for the bees to rebuild a new honeycomb.
- Leave the combs with brood, pollen and some honey for the bees to eat to enable future production of honey. In fixed comb hives only take away the combs at the sides of the hive.
- Always carry 2 clean and dry containers with airtight lids. Place the capped honey in one of the clean and dry container with a sealed lid to keep the bees out. *(The containers should be plastic or wood and NOT metal unless the metal contains stainless steel).* Honey is corrosive and if put in a metallic container that is not coated, it will react with the metal. The metal dissolved in the honey may present a health hazard to the consumer. Put combs with little or no capped honey into a separate container for local or home consumption, as it cannot be stored for a long period – consume it quickly!
- Return the top bar to the hive.





In absence of a centrifuge extractor, honey combs can be cut off the frame then extracted by straining

- When harvesting a mixed brood and honey comb remove as much brood as possible in the field to simplify work while processing your honey later. No brood juice should ever be allowed to mix with your ripe honey!
- Make sure there is no dirt or bees in the honey and avoid propolis and too much pollen in the honey.
- While harvesting also scrape the propolis off the top bars before replacing them and keep this for future baiting of hives.
- Continue cropping all the ripe combs in the same way but do not crop too much or else the bees may abscond. Leave at least 8 combs for the bees.
- Before closing the hive push the unripe combs behind the last brood or pollen comb and put the cropped top bars behind these and then cover the beehive with its cover.
- Carry the containers out of reach of the bees still buzzing around.



How to process the honey comb to get quality honey

Certain kinds or colors of honey attract a higher price than for a mixture, obtaining quality honey begins at harvesting stage.

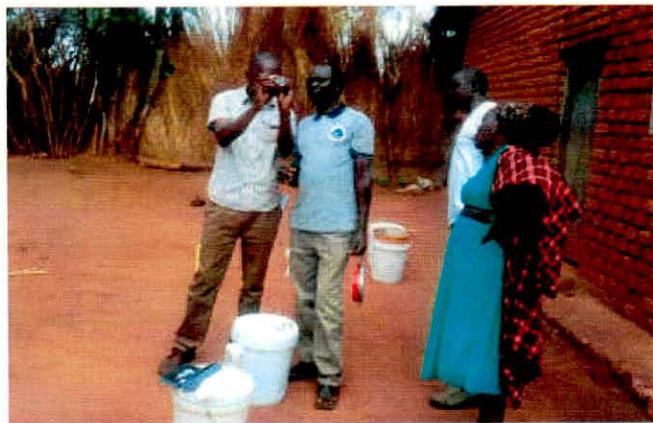
The following considerations should be adhered to get quality honey;

- Harvest and sort honey combs in separate airtight buckets, the light and dark combs.
- Remove dirt, dead bees, wax, dust and splinters of wood/grass or ashes to obtain clean clear honey.
- Honey should not be too smoky or have a fermented taste.
- Avoid storing honey near or within chemicals and insecticides store as these can affect the smell and taste of honey.
- Honey must have a good smell. Harvesting old dark combs and brood combs can affect the smell and colour of the honey. Over smoking the combs can also affect its smell.
- Honey must have a good colour, this depends upon the nectar source and age of the combs. Usually dark honey has stronger flavor and light coloured honey a more delicate flavour.
- Avoid propolis and too much pollen in honey if you are marketing your honey widely. These make the honey cloudy and many customers prefer clear honey.
- Honey presented for sale in the comb is seen to be pure and can fetch a good price. Select undamaged white sealed comb to sell as cut comb, for dark combs do not taste so nice.

Checking the moisture content of good honey

- **Using a Refractometer**

Open the refractometer, clean it and put a drop of honey onto a refractometer screen. Hold it against light and observe the calibration to which blue mark ends and take the reading.



Beekeepers in Nakapiripirit district being shown how to use a Refractometer to test moisture content of honey.

Beekeepers, honey consumers and traders should many times use a **Refractometer** to check the water content of quality honey which is normally about 18% water content. Honey with 20% water content must be consumed or sold as soon as possible to avoid it getting spoiled as time passes on.

- Other simple methods of checking water content of honey without a **refractometer**;

- Using a match stick.

Dip a match stick into the honey, if it lights then the honey is good.

- Putting a drop of honey on to dry soil.

If you put a drop of honey on to dry soil, if it spreads, then the honey is good.



Honey should be stored in wooden platforms or wooden tables, in airtight containers and at room temperature. NB, mature honey is very hygroscopic.

For further information:

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