

7 Tips On Getting Your Honeybees Ready For Winter

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You've enjoyed fresh honey all summer long.

Maybe you've even made some candles from the beeswax, or experienced the pleasure of selling your goods at the local farmers' market or giving them away to friends and family.

Regardless, [your bees](#) have given you pleasure during the warm and pleasant months of spring, summer and fall. Now it's winter, and it's time for you to take care of the bees that took such good care of you.

Bees, just like all wild creatures, have natural ways that they survive through the winter but since you're keeping them in an unnatural habitat, there are some steps that you need to take to help them along the way.

Help Your Bees to Survive Winter Naturally

If you've done your research, and I'm sure you have, then you know that your bees don't hibernate. As a matter of fact, it's probably a good idea that they don't or else they'd freeze pretty quickly –have you ever seen a fat honeybee?

Instead of hibernating, [honeybees form clusters](#) so that they can generate heat. They do this whether they're in the hive in the wild or in captivity. The thing is, when they live in the wild, they have the option of choosing the perfect conditions, but if they're kept in captivity, it's your responsibility to provide them with an environment that's conducive to their survival.

And what have we learned, as preppers trying to be as off-the-grid as possible? Keep things simple. Let bees be bees. They know how to take care of themselves because they've been doing it for thousands of years, so let them do it!

Let Them Make Propolis

Propolis is the glue that bees use for a variety of purposes in the wild. They use it to seal their hives and they also use it to keep their hive clean. It has antibacterial and antimicrobial properties that are so powerful that it actually mummifies any other insect that makes its way into the hive.

If something inside the hive dies, the bees wrap it in propolis and the little corpse is actually preserved much like a mummy. Appropriately enough, propolis means, "defense of the city" in Greek. Sealing the hive with propolis protects the bees from viruses and bacteria that could cause illness, too.

People have also begun to appreciate the health benefits of propolis – it's available for sale as a supplement and is used to treat a wide array of conditions including cancer prevention!

Even knowing all of this, many commercial hive operations have bred the propolis making out of their bees because it's a sticky mess that's similar to pine tar. Don't make that mistake – bees will use the propolis to seal their hives in the winter so that the cold and yuck can't get in.

Breeding bees that can't make propolis is like de-clawing your cat – it makes your life easier but it takes away the natural defense and way of life of the creature. The bees will become dependent upon you for survival, which is needless. Let bees be bees.



Don't Take All the Honey

Again, commercial operations, and even many small-time breeders, insist that it's fine to feed your bees high fructose corn syrup in lieu of leaving them their natural winter food source – [honey](#).

There are several reasons why this isn't [the best way to go for the bees](#), but that's a debate for another article. In short, don't be a pig. Leave your bees enough of their hard-earned work to feed themselves over the winter. If you aren't sure how much they'll need, harvest your honey in the spring instead of in the fall.

Ventilate Your Hive

As we discussed above, bees cluster to create heat. The inside of this cluster is 96 degrees Fahrenheit and, as you can imagine, when this kind of heat meets cold, condensation is created. This can gather at the top of the hive, then drip down on the bees and get them wet, which can cause them to freeze. Just like us, it's hard for you bees to stay warm if they're wet. Thus, it's important to properly ventilate your hive.

Natural hives are usually made of porous wood that absorbs moisture. They also have another fail-safe in case there's so much condensation that the wood can't absorb it – the single entrance/exit hole in the hive is at the bottom so that the condensation can drip out. This hole serves a secondary

purpose of ventilating the hive. When necessary, the bees can fan air through the hive up from the hole.

You can either choose to use wood that's thick to try to emulate the natural hive, or you can add SMALL ventilation slit off to the side of the hive so that if the condensation does build up, it doesn't drip down on the bees.

Don't make this hole large because it will let in cold drafts that will cause the bees to have to work harder to stay warm. More energy used means they'll need more food, or perhaps won't be able to generate enough heat to stay warm.

Insulate the Hive

Since the wood that you used to make your hive is probably much thinner than what would typically make up a natural hive, you need to insulate it to help keep the heat in. The bees are going to seal all of the holes with propolis, so you can just use a layer of foam then a layer of roofing paper to wrap the hive in so that it holds the heat.

Also, move your hives to a spot that gets full sun in the winter, especially if you live in a place that gets bitter cold. Try to put them in a place that's protected from the wind as well. This, combined with the black roofing paper, will help keep your hives warm.

Reduce the Entrance Hole

You don't want to live with mice, spiders and other vermin in the winter and neither do your bees. You may have a larger "reducer" on your hive for summer months so that many bees can come and go at the same time.

This isn't a good thing in the winter for a couple of reasons. First, it lets in too much cold air. Second, it lets in vermin. Reduce the size of the hole because in the winter, bees will only be flying on fairly warm days. You won't need much room for them to make mass entrances and exits.

Let the Snow Gather

You're going to be peeping out your window from your warm and cozy house looking at your hives. [If you have horses](#), you'll probably be looking at them, too. Both will have snow gathered on them and you'll want to rush out and brush it off, but there's no need.

As long as the snow isn't getting the hive wet, it's actually a really good insulator. Leave it where it is – there's nobody in the wild to sweep the snow off for them.

When Should You Winterize?

This is a question that doesn't have a definitive answer because it depends on where you live and when it gets cold. If you live in the far northern United States, it probably gets colder earlier in the year than if you live in the central or southern states.

You don't want to winterize your hive too early, because as long as it's warm, your bees are flying and doing what bees do. But you also don't want to wait too long. Typically, if it's going to dip below 20 or

so at night or it's going to be below freezing during the day, it's time to winterize your hives.

[embed]<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Cog7eRBP9A>[/embed]

Video first seen on [David Burns](#).

The bees will sense it coming and will start with their natural preparations. They'll start sealing cracks to eliminate drafts. "Natural" beekeepers won't disrupt the hive after November or so when the bees have sealed it up but if you need to, make sure that you seal it back well. The propolis is gluey so you can push it back together fairly well but don't do it unless you have to.

Just as with anything we do, getting your bees ready for winter is best done if you try to work with the natural order of things. Keep your hives as close to a natural wood as possible, let your bees eat honey, and let them make their own propolis to seal the air and cold out of their homes. Help where you need to and you'll have a happy, healthy hive to start out with in spring!

If you have any additional tips to winterizing your hive, please feel free to add them in the comments section below. We know that there are different types of hives, and we all have different ways of doing things, so let's share some information!



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