

Avoiding and Dealing with Honeybee Defensiveness and Stings

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Be alert to conditions besides genetics that can cause a colony to be agitated or defensive:

- Nectar dearth
- Robbing
- Hot weather
- Pestering from critters like skunks
- High numbers of Varroa mites or Small Hive Beetles
- Crowding or overcrowding – very large population “bursting at the seams”

If the colony is huge and bursting at the seams, add more space or depopulate by splitting or equalizing.

Only if the defensiveness continues for months not related to crowding or other factors, would you consider requeening the colony.

Suit up with good quality bee clothing. Wear light-colored, smooth-finished clothing. Bees are less threatened by light colors than dark colors.

Wear clean clothing and bathe daily. Sweat may anger bees.

Avoid perfumed soaps, shampoos, and deodorants. Bees can be attracted to those scents.

- Do not wear cologne or perfume.
- Avoid bananas and banana-scented toiletries.

Do not use open or outside feeders. Open feeding can create a frenzy that can affect you during inspections. Always feed inside the hive.

As you begin your inspection, smoke yourself liberally to help mask your fear pheromones and other scents. Repeat often.

Do your inspections during daylight hours but... avoid in-hive work and inspections on hot days.

Avoid opening hives when it is cold, dark (dusk/night), or very cloudy; the bees can become very clingy. Also avoid inspecting if there's a storm/**thunderstorm imminent.**

Use smoke right away as you open the hive. Smoking early can keep them from becoming agitated. If they start moving in numbers up through the inner cover

hole, use smoke much more liberally. Smoke will not harm them.

Do not stand in front of the entrance. Work around the sides or back of the hive. Bees establish a flight pattern that guides them into the entrance of the hive. If you block this entrance with your body, returning bees will get agitated. They might buzz close to you angrily or start thwapping into you with their bodies. These are warnings to move out of the way.

Move slowly and deliberately and remain calm. Do not swat. Bees see fast movement as threatening. Try to be calm. Take a deep breath or take a break if you need to calm down.

Avoid dropping frames or boxes.

Avoid rapping the hive as much as possible.

Notice the buzzing - The buzzing and activity of the bees can forewarn of agitation. Louder buzzing, increased movement, bees circling around you, or thwapping are signs to use more smoke or to move away from the hive briefly.

If you are stung, move away from the hive. Scrape off the stinger and liberally smoke the sting area even if it's just on your clothing or gloves. When a bee stings, it emits a pheromone to the rest of the colony that says “danger, we're under attack!” The rest of the colony will often move in to chase off the aggressor (you!) If they follow you when you are done inspecting, walk through dense brush or low hanging leafy branches. If there are none of those, move to a shaded area and keep moving away.

First Aid

As a beekeeper, being stung is inevitable. If you are stung:

- Apply ice to reduce swelling.
- Benadryl may help if you are medically okay to take it.
- Do not scratch the sting as this may increase swelling, itching, and risk of infection.
- If you've had allergic reactions to stings, consider consulting an allergist about an epinephrine auto injector (EpiPen) and other possible actions. Also, wear a medical identification bracelet or necklace stating your allergy.