

How sparkling clean are your bait hives?

Beekeepers have dozens of rules about what honey bees like or don't like, and what honey bees need or don't need. Many of these rules seem logical in human terms, at least superficially. But problems arise because honey bees don't know about these rules and, in truth, they don't give a rip.

Humans talk to one another as if they know all about bees, but they never actually talk to the bees. This is unfortunate, because we humans assume honey bees will like the same things we like, an idea that gets everyone discombobulated.

Housing is a personal thing

Take housing, for example. This past spring I set up eight swarm traps. I had fewer colonies than normal, so I had lots of empty equipment laying around. I set up three flower-pot shaped swarm traps in trees and established five empty hives as bait hives.

To do this, I put a bottom board on a hive stand, inserted the varroa drawer, and added a deep brood box with ten drawn frames—used but in reasonably good condition. I added an inner cover, an entrance reducer, and a lid. Lastly, I spritzed the entrance with [Swarm Commander](#) and walked away.

Some years the bees choose the tree traps, some years the bait hives. About half are in the sun and the rest are in the shade. And while some are twelve feet up, others are at ground level. I like to give them choices.

The conventional wisdom for swarms

Now, conventional wisdom says bait hives must be a certain height, face south or southeast, get direct sun and so on. I find none of this is true. After years of trapping swarms, the bees' selection of bait hives appears random from my perspective except for one detail: sun exposure. In all my beekeeping years, I've never had a swarm select a hive in direct sun.

That seems to surprise people but, if you think about it, bees in nature are fond of tree cavities. Tree cavities—no surprise—are found in trees. Those trees have leaves that make shade and therefore most tree cavities are shaded. So dah. Put your traps in the shade if you want to catch honey bees.

Late in March, I set up as many bait hives as I had equipment for, except one. One empty hive was in deep, dark shade. The frames—two boxes of mediums—were covered with thick mold that reeked, and the combs were darker than I like for re-use. I glanced inside then closed it up, making a mental note to tear down that hive, bleach the interior, replace the frames, and paint the outside. In short, it needed a complete overhaul. Later.

Taking the bait hive

In late April, as I was preparing to travel for a few days, I noticed dozens of scouts on the bait hive behind my house. I know a bevy of scouts doesn't mean anything except there's probably a swarm in the area. They check many places, so the simple presence of scouts doesn't promise anything.

After I left town, my husband never texted me with a swarm update, so I knew the scouts ultimately rejected that location. I forgot about the whole incident until I checked my hives a few days after returning home. Then, much to my astonishment, I found a huge colony. I actually heard it before I saw it, and the sound drew me to that disgusting heap of mold and mildew in the deep shade of the damp hill.

The swarm had rejected the gorgeously clean, sweet smelling, well-kept, color-coordinated hive that basked in the sunshine, in favor of a dark trash heap. *What is with them?*

Sharing the space

I allowed the new colony to establish itself a few more days before doing an inspection. I figured I could probably pull out some of those frames and replace them with newer ones. Once I gathered equipment, tools, and replacement parts, I went to work.

But the surprises just kept coming. Beginning on one end, I went through the frames. The mold was nearly gone, and the hive already smelled more like bee than mold. The colony was enormous and seemed to be flourishing. But when I got to the final frames, I freaked.

The spaces between frames eight and nine, nine and ten, and ten and the sidewall were stuffed with a fluffy green mouse nest. It was all lovingly fashioned from forest mosses that were still fresh and pliable. At that point I pulled off the top box only to find it was a double-decker! A two-story, triple frame mouse condo! And did the bees care? Not one iota. Bees on the right seven-and-a-half frames, mice on the left.

Bait hives are personal

The nest was massive. Even after I tossed the frames, I was left with many fistfuls of loose moss. I kept thinking, "What does this tell you?" All those adages about mold and mice, sun and shade, old and new, dark and light—none of it means anything. Just because we wouldn't chose a dark, dank, moldy domicile teeming with rodents and reeking of mold doesn't mean that bees think the same way.

It's been three months now. The colony is quite busy and packing away a crop of honey. The bees have a gentle disposition and play well with others. You would never guess they are the newcomers. Sometimes it's not what we don't

know that stymies us, but what we think we know that just ain't so.*

Rusty

[Honey Bee Suite](#)



A not-so-lovely bait hive: it's not perfect, but it's home.

*That's a quote, I think. No clue where it came from.

Note: This post contains an [affiliate link](#).