

Moving hives

One time or another, you are likely to have to move a bee hive. Maybe you've bought an existing hive. Or, someone has offered you a hive if you just move it out of the owner's yard. Or, spouse has given you an ultimatum that the bees have to go. Or, the neighbors have complained, and the local police say you have to move your bees somewhere else. If it's not you, then perhaps it is one of your fellow beekeepers who's doing the moving. Whatever the circumstances, here are some simple ideas that will make the process easier, and potentially less painful.

Moving hives involves four general steps:

1. Closing the bees inside the hive at the old location
2. Securing the hive components so the hive won't come apart during the move
3. Carrying, loading, and transporting the hive
4. Unloading and opening the hive at the new location

1. Closing the bees inside the hive at the old location

This step involves sealing the hive in some way that still allows the bees enough air for ventilation. If possible, you should close the hive either in the evening after the bees stop flying or early in the morning before they leave the hive.

Beekeeping books often suggest that you use a piece of screen wire that is roughly 6" wide by 14 1/2", the latter dimension being the width of the opening in the bottom board. You fold the screen in half long ways and insert the screen far enough into the entrance so that its springiness holds it in place, theoretically keeping the bees from escaping.

There are occasional problems with this technique that allow bees to escape. Sometimes the width of the opening of the bottom board is bigger or smaller than the length of the wire, or the screen is not stiff enough and sags at some point along its length. Or, in pushing the screen in, you turn it slightly, deforming it just enough to create an opening that the bees take advantage of.

I sometimes use the screen method, but I make sure to use stiff screen wire or fine mesh hardware cloth. I carefully measure the bottom board opening in each hive I'm moving and cut a screen just for that hive. I also staple the screen in place to keep it from shifting or being jarred loose during the move. Finally, I keep a roll of duct tape handy to seal any unforeseen leaks between the screen and the hive, as well as to seal any openings that are often present in old hives.

If you don't want to make screened entrance closures, you can purchase fancy versions from the beekeeping supply companies. Rather than using an entrance screen, I prefer a different method for sealing a hive. I make screened covers that go on top of the hive in place of the regular cover. (More about how to make them below). To close a hive, I just remove the regular cover, replace it with the screened top, and then completely seal the entrance with duct tape. That way, the screen securely covers the top, and the duct tape makes a bee-proof seal for the entrance.

To make a screen top, I start with a wooden frame the same dimensions as the top of a bee hive. It can be either a frame from an inner cover or an Imrie shim, a rectangular frame made from 1" (3/4" nominal) stock and available from Brushy Mountain Bee Farm for \$2.00.

I make a cross brace for the frame and then cover both sides with screen or, even better, fine mesh hardware cloth. The result is a rigid screened top.

2. Securing the hive components so the hive won't come apart during the move

Having a hive shift off of its bottom board during a move is not the most pleasant experience of beekeeping. Moving shakes the hive, and shaking agitates the bees. If they escape during the move, they are usually highly defensive and sting anyone within range. Once I was helping a friend move a couple of hives. We had used a single strap to secure the boxes to the bottom board. All was well until we started to load the last hive on my truck and realized that it was just an inch or so too tall to fit under the rack on the bed. We decided to tilt it just a little so that it would clear. Well, that little tilt was just enough to cause the bottom board to shift and allow the bees an opening. Fortunately I was wearing a veil, so I did not get stung on the face. Unfortunately, I was not wearing a bee suit or gloves, only a short sleeve shirt. I got about 50 stings before we got the hive sealed back up. The other guy was wearing a bee suit but was working with bare hands. He got a couple of dozen stings. I learned a lesson from that.

Bee catalogs sell hives staples. These work okay, but I prefer nylon straps because I think they hold the hive together more securely. To secure a hive, I use two nylon straps, preferably at least one with a ratchet lock that will get much tighter than an ordinary nylon or metal buckle.

If the hive is taller than three or four boxes I separate it, not only because a high stack is less stable and more likely to shift, but also because it can be very heavy. To move a hive in parts, I usually move the supers separately from the brood chamber by using a screened top for each part. I set the supers onto the upturned top to keep bees from escaping from the bottom and use the screened top to provide ventilation. I use two straps for each part.

3. Carrying, loading, and transporting the hive

Hives are heavy and awkward, and they are full of bees that tend to sting when agitated. While it is sensible to wear a veil while moving a hive, and even better to wear a full bee suit and gloves, that clothing is cumbersome and makes seeing difficult.

If you move hives often, a metal hive carrier is a wise investment. They are available for about \$60 from the beekeeping equipment companies. (The bee club might want to buy one to be shared among the members.) The hive carrier allows the two movers to hold the hive firmly and still see where they are walking, and its metal handle offers a better grip than the just the rectangular box of the hive itself.

If you don't have help moving a hive, or don't have access to a truck or van, you can break the hive into individual boxes that you can lift by yourself. Just use a screen on the top of each box for ventilation and an inverted cover on the bottom to keep the bees in. Again, make sure that you use two straps to secure the screen and bottom on each box. Individual boxes fit in a car truck or the back of a station wagon, or even the back seat of a car.

In transporting hives, it is important to make sure that the hive is secured so that it won't shift or, heaven forbid, tip over. There is no problem with a single box, but a stack of two or more should be tied to the side of the vehicle.

4. Unloading and opening the hive at the new location

Unloading is straightforward. First, remember to have a hive stand already set up and leveled at the new location.

Opening is easy, too. The most important aspect of opening a hive you've just moved is to realize that the bees are more likely to be defensive and have a tendency to sting. If the new location is near to a neighbor or if you are concerned about someone getting stung, wait until dark to open the hive. Also, make sure you are wearing a veil. Pull the screen out or duct tape off in a single movement as you move away from the hive to the side or rear. Come back the next day to remove the top screen and moving straps.

If you are moving a hive in sections, be sure to don your bee suit before you remove the top screens and restack the components. The bees usually aren't as agitated as you might think, but they still will have a tendency to sting. Although I haven't tried it, I think that you could lift each component off the inverted top and stack it on top of the moving screen of the lower component. Just remember to leave the top screen in place so that the bees in the intermediate sections have adequate ventilation. Then the next day, after the bees are settled down, you could come back and remove the screens between each component, restoring the hive to its normal configuration.