

A B C's

of Beekeeping

By Sandy Tabako

Always Bee Comfortable

The importance of being physically comfortable while working with your bees cannot be overstated. If you are fussing around with your suit, veil, gloves, etc. while trying to stay calm and focused, the bees will sense your stress and act accordingly.

Bee Suit

Should be large enough to leave an airspace between you and your suit. A tight fitting suit that clings will not be as protective against stings as one that fits more loosely, and will also not feel as comfortable as you stretch and move around. Make sure your suit is closed at the wrist and ankle area with elastic, or straps, or both! I also like to add a piece of duct tape over the spot where the suit zips up to meet the veil as sometimes there is a tiny gap there (large enough for a curious guard bee to try and enter!) There are paper, cotton, canvas, and multi-layered ventilated suits available. The ventilated suits are designed to be cooler as well as provide additional protection from stings. Even a good pair of coveralls will provide some protection, and you can add your own veil. I started out wearing three layers of clothes . . . a bee suit is so much easier!

Some beekeepers prefer to wear an inspection jacket instead of a full suit. Make sure there is elastic at the wrists and also around the waist/hip area. These are also available in all of the above materials. Keep in mind that most beekeepers generate quite a bit of heat while tending their bees (we call our bee suits our 'sauna suits' for that reason!), so for a quick check, a jacket may work well for you. Find protective gear that is comfortable, easy to put on and take off, and meets your personal needs. White is the most common color for bee suits as you won't look as much like their natural enemy . . . a bear! It is also the best for coolness when tending your bees.

Don't hesitate to try different styles of suits. We started with the standard cotton suits, graduated to the cooler (but much heavier) ventilated suits, and just recently upgraded to ventilated suits with side leg zippers. . . wish I had known earlier how much easier it was to get into this style of suit! Now I no longer have to struggle to suit up. It is nice to have multiple suits available now because we always have a back-up ready if one gets dirty or damaged. As far as caring for your suit, you can spot clean after use, but eventually it will need to be washed. Take off the veil before putting it into the laundry. Spot treat as needed, check for any mending needed, and launder according to directions. Veils should be hand washed and air dried. You will want to skip the laundry softener, though, as the bees really don't like the extra scent.

Veil/Hat

There are many styles of veils available: Folding veils, round style, 'fencing' style, Alexander veils, etc. Most bee suits actually come with a veil. Some are interchangeable, others are not. Some must be used with a hat (as the folding veils), some don't. The main purpose of a veil is to keep the bees off of your head, neck, and face. It is important to have a clear view of what you are doing. If you wear a hat, make sure it fits snugly so it doesn't start tipping as you work. There are cargo hats, safari style hats, plastic helmets, and hard hats... I like to wear a ball cap under the round or fencing veils to keep the netting away from my face. I also use a little towel rolled up and placed under my chin area for the same reason. If you have long hair, be sure to put it up before you put on your hat/veil/suit . . . it really hurts when you get tangled up in the zipper! A head band or sweatband is a good idea to help keep moisture out of your eyes. Pulling up your suit collar over the back of your neck is also helpful and adds protection. A rolled up towel sometimes helps there, too. Practice taking your veil off of your suit and reattaching it until you become familiar with how it works. Also note that usually one side of the veil zipper is intended to go over the zipper as it meets when you zip it closed. Better security. Sometimes there is a strip of velcro there to cover it up, but I still secure it with a little piece of duct tape. Better safe than sorry, and the extra peace of mind is worth it so I can relax knowing I'm more secure.

Gloves

Just like with suits, jackets, veils, and hats, there are also many different types of gloves available. Many beekeepers prefer to wear a thicker leather glove as they are durable and also protect well against stings. Kidskin and doeskin are thinner leather gloves which are more flexible and comfortable, but generally don't provide as much protection as the cowhide or water buffalo leather. Some gloves have an extended 'sleeve' that pulls up over the elbows for more protection. These can be cotton, canvas, nylon, ventilated - - and often a combination of those. They usually have elastic on the sleeve that helps prevent bees from climbing inside your glove. Some beekeepers are having good success with wearing thicker nitrile gloves....definitely not sting proof but you can actually feel what you're doing much more than with a bulky leather glove. Some people wear thin nitrile gloves inside their regular gloves, or inside of nice garden gloves. I recently heard a recommendation for using lineman gloves, or insulated safety gloves for working with electricity....usually made of rubber and having a longer 'sleeve' section that goes up to your elbow (but does not have an elastic closure there). If it fits snugly against your suit you should be OK. When I first started I didn't have official beekeeping equipment, so I wore my pair of Isotoner gloves under my Stanley garden gloves, and I rubber banded the wrists! It worked!

Just like with your suit, you want to have gloves that are comfortable but protective. You want to be able to bend your fingers to hold your hive tool and smoker...to be able to grasp your frames. Leather gloves 'break in' after time and get more flexible and comfortable. They will get dirty - - - really dirty! Hand washing is recommended, with putting on your gloves while wet to help resize them before they dry. However, after my good leather gloves accidentally went into the washing machine with my suit, I was pleasantly surprised at how well they handled it, so now I routinely wash them like that. You can use leather conditioner if they start drying out.

Footwear

BOOTS, BOOTS, BOOTS! Rainboots, garden boots, motorcycle boots, combat boots, high top hiking boots . . . you definitely want foot protection that covers your ankles well. Tennis shoes are almost a guarantee of getting stung on the ankle. Bees sting through socks, they work their way between laces...IF you are planning on wearing tennis shoes, you may want to consider getting a type of ankle/shin guard that can be placed over your shoes.

In conclusion, every beekeeper has their own personal style and preference when it comes to protective wear. Some feel comfortable checking their hives while wearing shorts, a tank top or tee-shirt....and flip flops! (Anyone who has observed Randy Oliver in action knows what I am talking about here!) Others feel safest when bundled up with goggles, earplugs, a face mask, snake boots, and every possible article of protective gear to keep maximum distance between themselves and the bees....I've also seen this in action but won't mention any names!

Bottom line is: Be Safe. Be Comfortable. You will be more relaxed and so will your bees.