

A B C's

of Beekeeping

By Sandy Tabako

Anticipate Behavior Changes

Even the nicest bees can have a 'bad' day....what kinds of things may cause your bees to have a change in behavior? Hopefully this is a temporary situation for you and your bees.

There are many factors that can change the demeanor of your bees. In a nutshell, I'll list the reasons that came to mind, and then expound on them:

- Weather
- Time of Day
- Hive Location
- Crowding
- Hungry or Thirsty?
- Weakened Hive
- Influence of Africanized Genetics
- Beekeeper Issues

Lack of preparation

Overheating

Neglecting your hives

Lack of confidence

Did you eat a banana?

Are you wearing fragrance?

Clean suit and equipment

Trying to rush or taking too long

Working up a sweat

Breathing through you mouth

Trying to work too many hives

Staying calm and focused

Weather

Rainy, foggy, and cloudy days tend to make the sweetest bees a little out of sorts. They get restless having so many cooped up in the hive when the foragers are stuck at home due to bad weather and cloudy skies. They are most relaxed when they can see the sun, which helps them navigate their day and feel productive.

Extreme heat or cold are both bothersome and annoying to us, as well as our bees. Keep in mind that bees usually keep their hives around 95 degrees to help incubate their brood, keep their nectar in good condition, etc. When it is too hot outside, the bees have to work overtime keeping their hive cooler, keeping the nectar from drying too fast, keeping everyone from overheating....not the best time to have the beekeeper make a visit! Same is true when it is too cold. . . they are working so hard to maintain their heat. The last thing they need is for their roof to be removed, letting that hard earned heat escape. It is suggested that we should avoid opening up the hives if it is less than 55 degrees, or more than 95 degrees. Usually I lay a pillowcase over the open part of the hive that I am not currently working. It seems to help keep them calmer and helps maintain the climate of their hive.

Windy days are a real challenge for our bees. Have you ever watched bees get battered around when they fly in high winds? If it is too bad, they just don't go out, or don't stay out as long as they normally would. It is too dangerous for them. So if you must work your hives on a windy day, be prepared for a probably 'full house' of restless bees who wish they were out.

Time of Day

You can work your bees any time you like. . . between 10 AM and 2 PM is the suggested 'best' time to open the hives as most of the foragers are away from the hive, and the nurse bees who are there don't usually fly yet so it will be naturally calmer.....just keep in mind that the later in the afternoon that you open the hive, the more bees that will be 'home' as the foragers are coming home for the night. More bees = more excitement.

If you work with you bees in the dark, be prepared to feel a bit disoriented, just as your bees will. They don't have the orientation of the sun to help direct them and they feel like they are under attack. They will come pouring out of the hive in waves, and it will be difficult to see if they bees are inside or outside of your veil! (a creepy feeling if you are not aware that this will happen). Be sure to wear boots and/or straps around your ankles as many bees will go to the ground and start climbing up.....on you! If you are using a flashlight or headlamp, it will help if you cover the lense with something red, like a piece of cellophane, tissue paper, or thin cloth. Since the bees don't see the red light as well, they will not dive towards it, but you will be able to see just fine and won't be as bombarded as you otherwise might be.

Hive Location

Make sure your hives are located away from walkways and doorways, where there may be constant commotion and distractions around them. Keep them away from pools where there will be lots of laughing and splashing. If your neighbors run a noisy day care at their home, avoid placing your hives near that side of your yard. Bees are very sensitive to vibration, so if there is an air conditioner or generator running constantly nearby the hives, the bees will become agitated and cranky. The occasional gardener is usually not a concern, though if they have to work close to the hives they should be made aware of them.

Crowding

Crowding can cause the bees to be restless and distracted, as well as overheated (this is a common cause of bearding, or clustering of bees below the entrance). They know that things can't go on as they are because there is not enough room and too many bees. Preparing to swarm? Some of the scout bees may already be preoccupied with looking for a new home. . . and also with convincing their sisters of the new location. Their focus is changing.

Honeybound? This means the Queen has, or will soon, run out of open cells to lay her eggs. As she gets nervous and restless, so does her entourage and the rest of the hive. "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!" Add more room for them to expand, or consider a split. That should help them to relax and calm down.

Hungry or thirsty?

This applies to the beekeeper as well as the bees! Make sure you are not hungry or thirsty before you even suit up. If the bees are hungry or thirsty, they can be more edgy and nervous acting. Make certain they have a viable water source, and feed them if there is not enough nectar and pollen for them to forage.

Weakened Hive

If the hive is weakened for any reason, the bees may be more agitated because they are stressed by their circumstances. They are more likely to have to fend off robber bees from stealing their food stores. Being watchful for adequate pollen, nectar, and water sources will help. Feed them if needed. Check for mites and hive beetles. Use an entrance reducer. If you are seeing ants and wax moths, that is a good indication that this hive is already in trouble....a strong, healthy hive can usually keep those invaders at bay.

But they used to be so nice. . . . what happened?

Especially if your 'nice hive' has swarmed, that means your nice queen has left town with half of her gentle daughters and sons. The new queen may not mate with only gentle Italian or Carniolan drones. There has more than likely been an increase of the Africanized bees making their genetics known. This is especially common with feral bees. Africanized bees tend to

swarm more often, and it is difficult to tell at first because most swarms are not aggressive as they have no home to defend. Once they establish their hive and the numbers increase, it is almost guaranteed that you will notice the more 'spicy' behavior that they are known for. Splitting these hives sometimes helps calm them down as they focus on remodeling their new homes. Re-queening is often the best suggestion to get them to be gentle again.

*****Beekeeper Issues*****

Did you eat a banana?

Avoid eating bananas anytime you plan to work with your bees.....the scent smells very similar to a pheromone that will excite the bees right when you want them to stay calm.

Are you wearing lotions or fragrance?

Bees are very sensitive to odors of any kind. . . avoid the perfumes, after shaves, and scented shampoos which will tend to draw unwanted attention to you

Working up a sweat?

Very likely when your are suited up or even wearing your inspection jacket. Bees are naturally attracted to perspiration. . . keep a mister bottle of water to spray off your face. I keep a small towel in my veil just under my chin to help absorb moisture (plus it helps keep my veil from touching my nose and neck where the bees are likely to be watching!)

Trying to rush? ---or--- Taking too long?

Be mindful of your bees...and be gentle and calm. Move slowly and stay focused. Find your balance. If you try to work too quickly, you will likely miss seeing the signs you are looking for and start making careless mistakes. Bees will get squished and/or you will get stung, which sets off an alarm pheromone to alert the other bees and they will instantly change their demeanor in reaction to this. At the same time, you don't want to take too long, either. The longer a hive is opened up, the more it disturbs the climate of the hive. The bees want their roof back on and business as normal. . .

Not feeling confident today? Stressed? Tired?

If you are not feeling on top of your game, the bees will know it somehow. The last thing you need if you are feeling unwell or unsure is to force yourself to work your bees only to start having things backfire and add more stress. The bees often reflect your attitude and demeanor.

Getting overheated?

You will get hot when working in your beesuit. . . even on a cool day! We call it our "sauna suits" for a reason! Keep in mind that when you get overheated, you will start to hurry things up

because you want to get out of that suit. . . walk away and cool off if you need, rather than rush with your bees and get them agitated. Grouchy beekeepers can make for grouchy bees!

Close your mouth

Did you know that bees are attracted to the CO₂ that we exhale? If you breathe through your mouth, you may find anxious bees crowding around your veil. Breathe through your nose.

Is your beesuit and equipment clean?

While you don't necessarily need to wash your beesuit after each use, this can actually be a factor in causing bees to become more feisty. If you have had multiple stings on your gloves, or honey, wax, and propolis is on your suit and gloves, chances are there are still pheromones on your suit and gloves as well. As I mentioned before, bees are very sensitive and curious....and very aware of pheromones.

Lack of preparation?

If you are running back and forth to get equipment and supplies you will get frustrated and start doing careless things....fumbling around, dropping tools, etc. Remember, commotion can signal the bees to be more on guard and they aren't sure exactly what is happening. Make sure that you have everything you will need organized and handy. Set up a little table or chair with your hive tools, smoker, extra boxes and frames, refills for food, etc. so you will be prepared and can stay calm and focused. This, in turn, will help keep your bees more calm as well.

Working too many hives when they are getting stirred up?

If you have multiple hives in your beeyard, it is a good idea to smoke ALL of the hives, not just the ones you plan to check. Bees are very sensitive creatures, and are also very curious. They figure out right away that something is happening in the “neighborhood” and they are on heightened alert and standby. After you work the first hive, usually the bees from that hive can be a bit riled up for a while....so when you start opening the second hive you may have the first bees still hovering around as well. Open the third hive and you have already got an audience from the first two hives watching over your shoulder.....and so on, and so on.....might be better to call it a day before you have the whole neighborhood of bees coming out to see what's going on!

Not only that, bees are smart and they remember. . . more than once I've gone out several days in a row. I've noticed that, following an episode with feisty bees, the next day or two it seems like they remember and are already on the defensive when they see the smoker and suit come out. As I mentioned earlier, a clean suit sometimes really does make a difference. . . especially at times like this!

Neglecting your hives

For whatever reason this may happen, if you are not regularly checking your hives it will obviously cause stress to your bees once you decide to open them up. It is difficult to break apart the boxes if there have been months, or even years, or propolis build up cementing everything together. The noise and commotion alone of trying to separate the lid from the top box, or boxes from each other, is enough to set off even the gentlest of bees. Whether you check weekly, monthly, or somewhere in between, try to set up somewhat of a routine so that you and the bees will become accustomed to the 'routine'.

Just walking around the yard and bees are getting too curious?

Are you wearing dark colors? Bears are one of the natural enemies of bees. . . and when we wear dark clothing, we look similar to a bear! Did you eat a banana? Wearing fragrance? We discussed both of those earlier but just a reminder here to stay fragrance free when around bees.

Are you moving quickly, dropping things, and/or making a lot of noise and vibration? Bees dislike sudden movements and noise. . .it triggers a danger response and those guard bees will do their job to see who the intruder may be. . . and to chase them away.

So the advice here is, if you want to enjoy working in your garden alongside your pollinators, go out there wearing light colors, avoid fragrance, stay “cool, calm, and collected”, move quietly and slowly, and mind your own business. . . and eat that banana after you go inside!