

Extracting, Bottling, and Selling Honey

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One of the most daunting sets of questions novice beekeepers face is, "How am I to extract my honey? How am I to filter it? How should I bottle it? How should I sell it? Let's take a look at each of these questions in turn and see if we can make the task of extracting, bottling, and selling honey less daunting and more of something to look forward to.

How am I to extract my honey? Most novice beekeepers want to extract their honey rather than sell it in the comb. Extracting honey from the comb is difficult without the proper equipment. The most convenient way to remove the honey from the comb is with the use of an extractor – a mechanical device that spins frames of comb around inside a drum using centripetal force to remove the honey. Many novices want to avoid the cost of purchasing a commercially made extractor (typically several hundred dollars), and may choose either to use someone else's equipment, crush the comb thereby squeezing out the honey, or uncap the honey and allow it to drip from the comb. Using someone else's extracting equipment certainly is less wasteful than the last two messy and time-consuming procedures. Still, there is a cost as more advanced beekeepers with equipment usually will charge a fee of sorts to recoup their costs. Typically this fee consists of turning over the wax cappings removed during the extracting process and, possibly, a percentage of the honey extracted.

How am I to filter it? If you extract your honey using any means, you'll need to filter out the unwanted hive debris, bits of wax, and so on that tend to appear in extracted honey no matter how carefully you perform the extraction process. If there are large particles in the extracted honey, then a double filtration system should be used. The first strainer or sieve has a coarse mesh and is used to filter out large pieces so that they do not clog the second strainer or sieve which is much finer. Household strainers can be used for the first filtering process; a fine-mesh nylon may be used for the second filtering process. All of the problems associated with filtering can be alleviated by using the equipment of an experienced beekeeper who probably will have everything at the ready.

How should I bottle it? Bottling honey in a way that preserves its appeal is paramount to making your product or gift acceptable. Even if you plan to give away your honey, it is still important to package it properly. Use commercial honey bottles or nice looking canning jars; avoid unsightly used mayonnaise jars and the like. Fill the honey nearly to the brim, leaving about 1/4 inch of air space for expansion. Even honey extracted using commercial equipment and filters will produce a product that is filled with a large number of tiny bubbles that can make the product look unsightly to the average consumer. After a few days these bubbles float to the top of a container of honey. Be certain to decant your honey from a container with a gate at the bottom so as to avoid including the bubbly froth that has accumulated at the top of the honey. Be certain to maintain sanitary conditions and be certain to observe state health codes with regard to bottling and product labeling. Contact your local Department of Health or your local beekeepers' association for details.

How should I sell it? Selling honey can be one of the greatest rewards of beekeeping. It's a pleasure to speak with friends, neighbors, and family members about your hobby and love of honey. A year of work by both the bees and yourself will normally result in about 75-200 pounds of honey per colony – though the reward can be much greater than this under certain conditions. After your honey has been properly bottled and labeled, take it along to 4-H meetings, club meetings, social events, to the local farmers' market and such. You'll be surprised at how fast it will sell. Once you've established a reputation, people will return time and again for your excellent product. Giving away honey can be one of the best forms of advertising, so keep it in mind. When you do sell honey, don't under price it. You've invested a considerable amount of time, money, and effort to generate a product of which you can be justifiably proud. You don't want to undercut other beekeepers who are selling commercially either. If you sell more than a small amount of honey (beyond a "hobbyist" amount that serves to recoup your expenses of producing it), be certain to obtain a business permit, and collect sales tax in accord with the law.