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### Harvesting Honey can be Sweet and Sticky

As summer winds down, our thoughts and efforts turn towards harvest. For most families, that includes the final harvest from their vegetable gardens. Farmers are anxiously waiting for soybeans and corn to be ready to harvest. In our home, we are once again focused on honey harvesting. Yes, we are amateur beekeepers, and this is a super sticky time of year for us.

There is a lot of prep work that goes into Honey Harvesting. Not only do you need the right equipment: honey extractor, knife, filter and bottles, you first need frames and frames of capped honey. Honey that is in the comb with a wax cover is called capped honey. To get that, you need bees, lots and lots of bees. We purchased our first batch of bees in 2013 as part of an FFA Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) for our son. Armed with our copy of, "Beekeeping for Dummies" we chose the perfect location for our hive, built our own supers and selected and ordered our first box of bees from Pennsylvania.

That first year was quite a learning experience for all of us. We set the bees up in a pasture near the river. This gave the bees access to plenty of grasses and native flowers as well as water. It was a great location, and they did very well. Even with all the challenges of new beekeepers, that first colony produced almost four gallons of honey from only 20 capped frames.

Over the years we have increased our hive numbers and unfortunately decreased them as well. Winters can be hard on bees in Nebraska. The cold alone is hard on them but the fluctuations and moisture can really affect their numbers. After a particularly rough winter three years ago we decided we were taking a beekeeping break. That break did not last too long.

Last August, my brother-in-law notified us of a swarm of bees in a tree on a rural road. We grabbed our bee suits, our smoker and a cardboard box. Once we got them home, they happily moved into their new hive, and we were back in bees again. August is not the best time to capture a swarm because normally they would not have enough time to produce the honey they need to survive the winter. This colony required a lot of sugar water to supplement them to get them through the winter, but they made it. Sugar water is made by mixing 1 part boiling water with 2 parts white sugar. It's a much-used recipe for a beekeeper. This summer that colony grew so large we had to split it into two hives, and they are "busy as bees". So, it's harvesting time.

Harvesting honey is sticky business. Everything gets sticky; the floor, the tools, our clothes, everything. There aren't many steps to harvesting honey, but it does take a while. First you have to pull the capped honey filled frames from the hives. Easier said than done since the bees really don't want you to take their honey. We use our smoker a lot when harvesting. Fun fact: beekeepers use a smoker to "distract" the bees. When they smell the smoke, they assume their hive is on fire. Just like people, they want to grab their favorite things to take with them. In their case, bees will want to fill their bellies with honey before they leave. So, most of the hive will be focused on gathering honey and not on attacking you. Not all of them, so we will still wear our bee suits.

Once we pull the frames and brush off all the bees, we will take the frames inside and use a large knife to cut the "caps" off the honeycomb. After that, into the extractor they go. The extractor is a large centrifuge. Ours holds 2 frames at a time. We will spin them, by hand, for about 6 minutes on one side. Flip them over and spin them on the other side. This pulls the honey out of the honeycomb without damaging it. After all the frames are spun, we open the valve on the extractor and filter the honey as it flows into our jars. And that is it. Let the clean up begin. We used to try to do it all in one or two days but since our kids grew up and moved away, we will take our time this year.

Next time you reach for your little bear of honey for your tea, cereal or toast, think of all the work of the beekeeper that goes into that sweet treat. Not to mention all the work of the tiny little honeybee. Another fun fact: It takes 127,000 flower visits by bees to make one teaspoon of honey.

If you have an interest in bees or beekeeping, check out the Nebraska Beekeepers at [nebraskabeekeepers.org](http://nebraskabeekeepers.org). At their site you will find information on a Youth Scholarship they offer as well as local events featuring their observation hives. Although it is over, you can see a great display at the Nebraska State Fair put on by their organization.

Last fall my husband built me an observation hive and I have been taking the bees to schools to educate young people on the importance of pollinators. It's a great exhibit and you would not believe the questions these kids ask me. I really enjoy it, and I think the kids and adults do too.

We do have classes at the County Fair where 4-H members can exhibit bee-themed items. They can build bee houses, make items with beeswax, or even submit display boards on bee topics. If you have an interest in any of these topics, reach out to your local Extension Office for more information. We would love to see more projects on these amazing little insects.

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