

Gold Star Honeybees®

HOW TO INSTALL A PACKAGE OF HONEYBEES INTO YOUR GOLD STAR TOP BAR HIVE

What do you want in the way of bees to go into your Gold Star Top Bar Hive?

In an ideal world, you would capture a large, healthy swarm. This is a colony of bees with a mated queen, who led approximately half of a thriving colony out of their home in search of a new beginning. These bees will be seriously motivated and well organized, with a “hive mind” consensus, to build honeycomb—as a place for their queen to begin laying.



Figure 1 - An impressively large swarm of bees

However, swarms are somewhat random events of nature, and you may or may not connect with one. So, another method of obtaining bees is to purchase a “3-pound package” of bees from a honeybee supplier. Where this gets tricky is that to order bees, you need to plan far in advance—January or February is not too early to be shopping for bees! A swarm, on the other hand, is more of a “drop everything and go collect them” event—likely in May or June. Great if you can get ‘em. If not, you’ll want to have purchased a package in advance.



Figure 2 - A good looking package of honeybees

These bees will either need to be picked up at your local supplier’s apiary, or they will arrive at your local post office - in a shoebox-sized screen-sided crate-like box. The post office will call you asking you to (hurry!) come and get them! You will need to install them into your top bar hive as soon as possible—best if no more than 24 hours after you have received them. They cannot live inside that package for long—they need to fly and to forage.

When you first bring them home, put them somewhere out of harm's way. Then -- get yourself prepared, before you open the bee package!

Here is what you need:

Some protective beekeeping equipment:

At Gold Star Honeybees, we prefer the jacket with the veil that zips on, since it's easy to get in and out of, obstructs less of our vision while we're working, and can be thrown in the washing machine on a regular basis, but there are other options, including full length bee suits, or helmet and veil combos with yards of rope to tie yourself into them. A pair of bee gloves is a very good idea too.

Your Gold Star Top Bar Hive - assembled and placed:

If you live where it snows a lot in the winter, a sunny location is best. If your locale gets into the 90's frequently in the summer, and rarely snows in the winter, you will want a location with dappled sunlight, even some shade. Set up your hive with its front entrances (the three holes) facing generally south. Be very sure that the hive is sitting quite level, as the bees will build their honeycomb "plumb" i.e. straight up from the center of the earth, so if the hive is not level, the comb will not lift out easily when you go to inspect it.

Sugar Syrup:

Make some 1:1 sugar syrup. 1:1 syrup means a syrup made from mixing water and granulated white cane sugar in a mixture that is one part sugar to one part water, by weight or by volume. This recipe is one of the reasons you often hear beekeepers repeating the phrase "A pint's a pound the world around." What does that mean? It means that a pint of water weighs about a pound—so that if you take one pound of sugar, and one pint of water (aka as two cups) —you have created 1:1 sugar syrup. In other words, the volume of a pint and the weight are so close that you can use them interchangeably.

Bees that come to you in packages have no resources whatsoever to work with, and no comb to store nectar in. Making wax comb takes carbohydrates — so the bees will need to be fed in order to help them get established, or they are likely to starve. Boil the water, take it off the heat, wait a few minutes, then stir in the sugar until it's all dissolved. Voila! Bee "junk food"!

A feeder:

There are several methods of making sugar syrup feed available to your bees— Gold Star Honeybees sells a syrup feeder system designed to fit securely into the Gold Star Top Bar Hive. If you've got one of these, it works like this: you place

the feeder base into the hive, fill the one-quart Mason jar with the syrup, screw on the lid with the small holes in it, then go outside to your hive, and upend the jar. Wait a few moments until it ceases to drip and then set it into the blocks in the feeder base.



Figure 3 - Gold Star Syrup Feeder

Please note that if the weather is expected to be chilly - say, below 50°F, you should consider providing fondant for your newly-hived package. At temperatures below 50°F, your bees will need to stay in their cluster to survive, and they will not be able to visit a distant syrup feeder. Gold Star Honeybees offers a fondant feeder frame that hangs in the hive much like a honeycomb, and provides food that the bees can reach while they are in cluster.



Figure 4- Gold Star Fondant Feeder

Now set up your hive for the install:

Put your feeder tray into one end of the hive, against the end panel. Set the syrup jar on it. Put ten top bars across the hive cavity above the feeder, and then a follower board with an access hole in it. The bees will access the feeder through this hole in the follower board. Put ten top bars across the hive cavity on the other side of the hive, then the second follower board. What you have now is an open space ten bars wide, surrounded by two follower boards.

It should look like this - kind of like a “bowl” for your bees!



Figure 5 - The "Bee Bowl"

Gather up some helpful stuff:

- a screwdriver or putty knife for prying up the lid of the package.
- a push pin for attaching the queen cage to a top bar. It's smart to have several on hand, since you may drop or bend the first one.
- a sheetrock screw is useful for removing the cork from the exit hole in the queen cage. Gently press the tip into the cork and turn, being careful not to push so hard that it forces the cork into the cage, but only catches the cork, like a tiny corkscrew.
- a pair of pliers, specifically vise-grip pliers, is useful for grabbing the feed can by the rim, and removing it from the package.
- a bottle of rubbing alcohol—we use this in case we get stung. We just splash some on where the sting was and go about our business. It eliminates the alarm pheromone that makes more bees want to sting.

Get your protective gear on:

If you've got the jacket, pay particular attention to where the zippers all come together under your chin, and use the Velcro that is there to prevent any stray bees from getting inside your veil. It's smart to tuck your pants into your socks, too, and we know you're already wearing close-toed shoes, right? Put your gloves on last, maybe even wait until you've got the package open to add your gloves.



Figure 6 - The Beekeeper's Fashion Statement

Now go get your package of bees. Pry the flat wooden lid from the top of the package of bees. Now look at the top of the package. Your goals are to get to the queen cage, and to remove the can of feed that came in the package. It should be obvious whether you need to remove the feeder can before you can get to the queen cage. Some packages have a keyhole that holds the queen cage, and the cage lifts right out. Some packages are made so that you must remove the syrup can first.

The round hole that the feeder can is set into is usually a tight fit. The best method we have found for getting it out is to push down on one side of the can, then catch hold of the lifted edge with a pair of vise grips, and lift it straight up and out. Be patient and work carefully, there's no real hurry here. Once you've got the queen cage and the can out, set the lid back on over the hole you've made, to keep the bees inside.

Now look closely at the queen cage. First of all, you'd like to see that your queen is alive and well! She will probably have traveled with several attendant bees inside her cage with her. You may have to watch for a little while to make out which bee is the queen, but... if all the bees in the cage are alive – then you know that she is too!

The exit end of the queen cage will be filled with a sugar candy. There will likely be a cover of some kind over this candy plug — and you must remove this cover so that the bees can get to the candy plug.

If it is a cork, use a screw to remove it —poke the sheetrock screw gently into the cork, twist, and pull it out. If it is a metal flap, you can simply bend it back.

Sometimes there is a cork in both ends of the queen's cage – **so be sure that the cork you remove is actually covering a candy plug!**

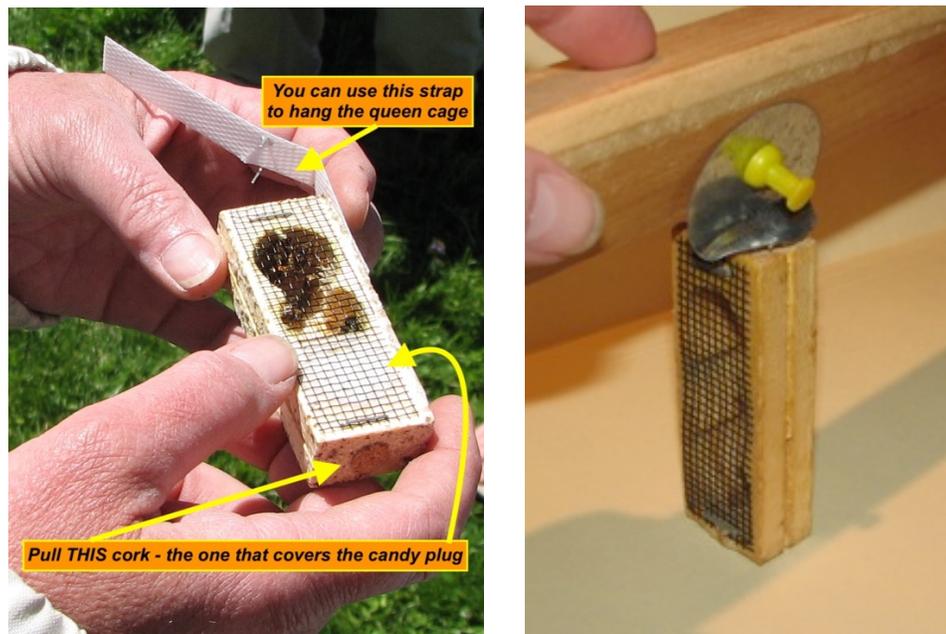


Figure 7 - Examine the Queen cage

Now you want to hang the queen cage from a top bar. If there is a plastic strap, you should be able to use that to attach the cage to a top bar. Queen cages come with various things attached that hold them in the package—these are usually also good for attaching the queen cage to a top bar. Using whatever method seems reasonable—attach the queen's cage firmly to the beveled downward point of one of the top bars. Set this top bar into the hive, next to the follower board. This bar will act as an "anchor" bar. Over the first several days, the bees in the cage and the bees in the hive will go to work to eat the candy blocking the exit hole. This will release the queen.

Now for the big moment:

You should open one of the front center entrance holes - all of the other entrances on the hive should have corks in them.

Pick up the package, holding the lid over the hole, and firmly “bonk” the package on the ground. This will cause the bees to fall into a loose pile. Now take the lid away from the hole, and simply pour and shake the bees into the Bee Bowl - that empty space in the hive that you prepared between the two follower boards.

You may need to thump on the box a little bit to knock the majority of the bees out of the box and into the hive. When most of them are in the hive, set the box with any stragglers beneath the hive. They will find their way in eventually.



Figure 8 Ouring the bees into the bee bowl

Now pick up the remaining top bars, and place them over the cavity you poured the bees into. Make sure they all touch. If there is extra space, and sometimes there is, since wood expands and contracts due to heat and moisture, then make sure the extra space is outside of the follower boards, and fill it in with some of the spacers that come with your kit. Don't worry about bees left stranded on top of the top bars, they can walk down right off the edge of the bars and go get in the hive.

Next, set the gabled roof of the hive in place. Now you can step back, and take a deep breath.

If this is your first hive—**Congratulations!** You are now a beekeeper!

In 3-5 days you will want to open the hive, and take a look at the queen cage to be sure the queen has been released by the bees. If she has, you can now remove the queen cage. A sharp steak knife will be helpful in this process if your bees have built wax onto the queen cage (always cut from the bottom up) and it's helpful for prying the pushpin out as well.

Refill the feeder as necessary, and keep your eye on the feeder until you notice that they have stopped eating the sugar syrup and are now foraging on plants and flowers instead.

Enjoy your bees!



Figure 9 - Welcome to the bee yard

Thank you for making Gold Star Honeybees a part of your beekeeping journey!