

DIY: Being a Bee Cleaner

By Peter Coxon

I do love bees and for the most part I still love beekeeping too, however there is one aspect of beekeeping I find really onerous ... cleaning up after them! ... it's even worse than having teenagers!

Consequently, I'm always looking for shortcuts and labour-saving tricks. In the summer it's not too bad as I simply pop the frames in my home-made solar wax extractor. The wax all melts, gets filtered and ends up quite clean enough to exchange for foundation, and the frames also come out reasonably clean too, and all with

minimum expenditure of elbow grease, although they still need scraping, torching and or boiling. However, even though the wax extractor has a double-glazed glass lid, it really doesn't get going until the sun shines and the outside temperature is >18o. The last Apiarist included a re-print of something I wrote a while ago about boiling frames in washing soda but that's only worth the hassle for BIG jobs i.e. ≥ 20 frames say.

For smaller clean ups I've been trialling a new method using steam.

Method

1. Take a well-insulated box and fill with old frames. Now where can we get one of those? ... 💡 a Polynuc of course and there are additional benefits (see later).

2. Sit the nuc on a plastic tray larger than the varroa mesh floor

3. Plug in a steam generator (? 🤔 Errr?) into the hive entrance. I happened to have a Kärcher (other brands available) steam cleaner bought as present for me some years ago.

As an alternative use a steam generator for wallpaper stripping. The latter being much cheaper than the former; £30-£50 versus >£140.

My old Kärcher died on the first run anyway, so I was obliged to use the other unit and it worked as well or better.

Coincidentally the pointy end on both was ~25 diameter ... a perfect fit for entrance of a Polynuc. If yours isn't, an adaptor may have to be made. It doesn't have to be airtight as there's a big hole on the bottom of the box anyway, but you'll need something to stop the steam pipe falling out and scalding you.

4. Replace the lid and go away to do something useful for an hour, drink tea / beer for example.

5. On your return remove the lid, quickly take out the frames and shake what's left on the frames into the bottom of the box. This will mostly be the chintinous pupal cases.



6. Give the frames a quick once over with a stiff brush before they cool too much and put to one side.

7. It's important to dump the pupal cases and other detritus in the bottom of the Nuc by inverting the box over a bin / wheelbarrow/ compost heap before it cools down and the residual wax sets up otherwise, you'll just have to heat it up again with the steamer to get it out.



Net result

1. Clean frames ...possibly sterilised but a bit more of scrape and a torching might be a good idea

2. Cleanish wax ...in that tray underneathdon't forget that tray.

3. Added bonus mentioned earlier – clean Polynuc ! I don't know if you have ever tried cleaning polystyrene hives but scraping off old propolis often results in pulling out chunks of polystyrene and damaging the surface but after steaming the propolis will be softened can be mostly wiped off.

I also sprayed the Nuc afterwards with a weak solution of bleach as a belt and braces approach to hygiene. (Bleach – mostly sodium hypochlorite does also dissolve propolis but only quite slowly).

You may / will find the mesh in the bottom of the Nuc a bit gunked up, so invert the box and direct the steam onto the mesh to cleaning up. As an alternative refinement you could add a piece of sacrificial mesh above the mesh floor to catch most of the detritus. You could even remove the mesh completely by undoing the 6 or so screws holding it in place and using the sacrificial mesh instead ...the world's your oyster. 

